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Realizing Human Rights in the Transition to Adulthood: A Parental Perspective on Barriers Facing Youth with Intellectual Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia

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Abstract

Children and adolescents with developmental disabilities, along with their families, require flexible and comprehensive support to ensure the full realization of their human rights during the processes of growing up, socialization, and social inclusion. Adolescents with intellectual disabilities represent a distinct group; however, in the Republic of Serbia, they are not adequately recognized in national and local policies. This lack of visibility represents a significant systemic barrier to the fulfillment of their right to equal participation and tailored support. This paper presents the results of a study involving 103 parents of young people with intellectual disabilities from Belgrade and Niš. The findings highlight a profound gap between *de jure* human rights and *de facto* reality: upon completing education, young people face social isolation and a lack of community-based services, which directly infringes upon their right to social integration and peer contact. The study also reveals that parents feel overwhelmed due to the state's failure to provide the necessary support structures, leaving families to bear the burden of systemic deficiencies. The paper concludes that a shift from a medical to a rights-based model is essential to transform social welfare services from 'hard to access' benefits into guaranteed entitlements that foster dignity and autonomy for young people with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords

Human rights, adolescents with intellectual disabilities, social welfare services and support, transition to adulthood

Introduction

Contemporary approaches to supporting youth with intellectual disabilities are rooted in the human rights model, which views disability not as an individual medical deficit, but as the result of the interaction between

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persons and the environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society (Degener, 2016). The central pillar of this framework is the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UN CRPD, 2006), which promotes the principles of dignity, individual autonomy, and the freedom to make one's own choices. During the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the realization of these rights becomes particularly critical. *Article 19 of the Convention* emphasizes the right to independent living and community inclusion, which implies that youth with intellectual disabilities must have access to support services that prevent isolation and marginalization (United Nations, 2006). However, in practice, the transition period is often described as "falling off a cliff", as the systemic support structures available during childhood frequently disappear upon entry into the adult world (Quinn and Flynn, 2012).

In the Republic of Serbia, although a legal framework aligned with international standards exists - such as *the Law on the Prevention of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities* (2006), *the Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities* (2009) *the Law on Social Protection* (2011) and *the Law on the Protection of Persons with Mental Disabilities* (2013) the implementation of rights to work, education, and social protection remains uneven across local communities. The lack of specific policies that recognize adolescents with intellectual disabilities as a distinct group leads to their right to participation remaining merely declarative, while families are left to rely on their own resources to navigate systemic barriers (Mitrović and Vidojević, 2015).

Transition refers to the shift from childhood to adulthood in terms of service provision, restructuring daytime activities, and more holistically, attaining increased independence and proficiency across various adult roles. While some authors, such as Wyn and Dwyer (Wyn and Dwyer, 2000), define transition specifically as the move from school to work, others, like King (King, Baldwin, Currie and Evans, 2005), see it as a more gradual process in which young people develop the skills required for adulthood. Thus, transition can be viewed as a prolonged period spanning much of adolescence and early adulthood, encompassing the years leading up to and following school exit. (Arnett, 2000) suggests this occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 and refers to it as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2000, 469).

Despite improvements in the legislative framework in the Republic of Serbia in recent years, young people with intellectual disabilities and their families continue to face difficulties related to the quality and availability of social, educational, and healthcare services, employment opportunities, as well as insufficient financial support to cover the additional costs required to address these challenges. Young people with intellectual disabilities in Serbia are not recognized as a distinct target group; instead, they are

categorized within a highly heterogeneous group of young people with developmental disabilities or impairments. The current Youth Strategy recognizes all adolescents from vulnerable social groups, as it hinders a comprehensive analysis of their needs and the challenges they face. Needs are analysed in a fragmented manner, by sectors, which results in measures, services, and programs for improving their situation not reflecting the actual needs (National Youth Strategy for the period 2022-2030, 2023). Additionally, the support services offered to them are not designed to address the specific challenges faced by this group. Upon completing formal education, young people lose their entitlement to the service of a personal child assistant, which is provided to children up to the end of their schooling period (the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions and Standards for the Provision of Social Protection Services, 2019, section 5). On the other hand, home assistance services are typically organized for the elderly and are rarely available to children and young people, even though there is a legal basis for their development and provision (the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions and Standards for the Provision of Social Protection Services, 2019, section 5). The service of a personal assistant is provided to adult users who are entitled to an increased allowance for assistance and care from another person, who are capable of making independent decisions, and who are employed, among other criteria - conditions that are not commonly met by individuals with intellectual disabilities. The availability of day-care centres is low, and support services for independent living are extremely underdeveloped. Consequently, it can be said that, after finishing high school and during the transition to adulthood, young people with intellectual disabilities are left without adequate systemic support. There is no service that addresses their needs for support in daily activities, vocational training, and community integration.

Existing research on the aforementioned topics rarely addresses the family perspective regarding the transition of adolescents with intellectual disabilities into adulthood. On the other hand, for services to be developed (and implemented), it is crucial to consider the wide range of goals that families with a child with disabilities identify as necessary for a successful transition to adulthood. With this in mind, this paper provides an overview of research on the needs of adolescents with intellectual disabilities who are in the transitional period from adolescence to adulthood, from the perspective of parents living in the cities of Belgrade and Niš. The results of this study may contribute to identifying critical areas where support is needed for these young people and their families to facilitate a successful transition into adulthood and to maintain family functionality, considering the challenges faced in raising a child. The paper is structured as follows: the first part discusses the challenges in the functioning of adolescents with intellectual disabilities in the Republic of Serbia. The next part presents the

research findings. Subsequently, the main findings are discussed, and recommendations are provided for improving the position of young people with intellectual disabilities in the Republic of Serbia.

Challenges in the Functioning of Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia

The definition of intellectual disabilities has undergone various stages of development, reflecting changes in societal attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Today, intellectual disabilities are not only viewed through the lens of reduced cognitive abilities but also recognized as conditions with diverse origins requiring different resources and forms of support to address them. Support is aimed at personal development for individuals with intellectual disabilities to enhance their functioning within their environment. Broadly defined, intellectual disabilities are characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, manifested in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. These disabilities emerge during the developmental period, typically before the age of 22, but current functioning is considered in the context of age, culture, peers, community environment, etc. (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2024).

Schalock and other authors propose that an individual is considered to have intellectual disabilities based on the following three criteria:

- Intellectual functioning is below average. This criterion pertains to general mental capacity, including learning, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities. A common benchmark is an intelligence test score below 70, indicating intellectual disabilities.
- There are significant limitations in two or more adaptive skills, specifically conceptual, social, or practical skills used in everyday life. Conceptual skills include language use, literacy, understanding the concept of money, time, and numbers. Social skills involve social responsibility, self-esteem, communication, susceptibility or caution in social relationships, social problem-solving, relationship-building skills, and the ability to follow rules. Practical skills encompass activities of daily living, such as personal care and hygiene, independently meeting basic needs (e.g., feeding, dressing, using the toilet), navigating transportation, managing money, ensuring personal safety, using a phone, and understanding routines and time.
- The condition manifests before the age of 22, with evidence of difficulties and developmental impairments appearing during childhood and early adolescence (Schalock & Luckasson, 2021; Schalock, Luckasson, and Tassé; Arora et al., 2020).

Adolescents with developmental disabilities and impairments are among the most vulnerable groups in the Republic of Serbia in terms of accessing rights and equal opportunities across various areas of functioning. They face numerous challenges and barriers related to accessibility, information access, education, the labour market, and their rights and participation in political life. The situation of young people with disabilities has been sporadically addressed within the domestic system. There is a limited amount of research on the status, needs, and quality of life of adolescents with intellectual disabilities in Serbia, and information is often inferred indirectly from studies of the broader group of children and youth with disabilities. The total number of people with disabilities in Serbia is not reliably known, but it is estimated that this group constitutes 8% of the total population (Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2020-2024, 2020). The total number of children and young people with developmental disabilities and impairments is also unknown, but previous research indicates that this target group is highly discriminated against, more exposed to violence and neglect, faces barriers to accessing their rights, and is at high risk of social isolation (Stefanović and Lazarević, 2023). Nevertheless, this target group faces specific challenges both in terms of development and social inclusion, particularly during the transition from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. At the same time, the quality of life of young people with intellectual disabilities impacts the overall quality of life of their parents and the entire family system.

When discussing the situation of adolescents with intellectual disabilities in Serbia, it is important to note that there are no specifically designed services for this target group, as they are not recognized as a distinct group. The normative framework provides services for young people with developmental disabilities and impairments, including personal assistance services, day care for children and young people with developmental disabilities, supported living, and respite care (the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions and Standards for Providing Social welfare Services, 2013, section 5). Although active employment policies are in place in Serbia, there remains a significant number of long-term unemployed individuals and those lacking the necessary skills and knowledge for labour market integration. Additionally, individuals with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, are among the most frequently discriminated groups in all areas of social life. They also face a high degree of social distance, especially in the domains of employment, education, social relationships, and marriage (Korać, 2018). Institutional care in Serbia still houses the majority of children and young people with developmental disabilities, with more than half of these children not being integrated into

the educational system or any educational programs (National Organization of Persons with Disabilities of Serbia, 2017).

According to the normative framework, children and young people are entitled to use personal assistant services during their formal education (the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions and Standards for Providing Social welfare Services, 2013). Upon completing formal education, the right to this service ceases, and there is no service to replace it, leading to the family members resuming the overall care of the young person. On the other hand, home assistance services are typically organized for older individuals and are rarely available for children and youth, despite the legal basis for their development and provision (the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions and Standards for Providing Social Welfare Services, 2013). Personal assistant services are provided to adult users who qualify for an increased allowance for personal care, who are capable of making independent decisions, and who are employed, among other criteria (the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions and Standards for Providing Social Welfare Services, 2013), which is not often the case for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The availability of day-care services is low, and support services for independent living are extremely underdeveloped. Consequently, it can be said that after completing secondary school and during the transition to adulthood, adolescents with intellectual disabilities remain without adequate systemic support, and there is no service that meets their needs for support in daily activities, professional training, and community integration (Matković and Stranjaković, 2020).

For many young individuals with intellectual disabilities, daily life often involves facing various barriers to achieving and experiencing social relationships similar to those of their peers or siblings without disabilities. Common activities that are easily accessible and available to most young people, such as participating in sports, going out, and socializing with friends, are often not readily achievable for this group. On the other hand, due to developmental specificities and vulnerabilities, these young individuals require specially designed support programs in the process of gaining independence to have opportunities to learn new skills, maintain, and enhance existing life skills. This aspect is particularly important in the context of preparing for employment and the process of workforce engagement.

A study conducted by the *National Organization of Persons with Disabilities* in collaboration with the UNICEF office in Serbia revealed that individuals with intellectual disabilities are among the most discriminated social groups in all areas of social life and face high levels of social distance, particularly in employment, education, social relationships, and marriage (National Organization of Persons with Disabilities Serbia, 2017). The same

study notes that families of these children and young people also face numerous difficulties, as they contend with negative public attitudes, with nearly half of the parents reporting experiences of derogation, insults, or harassment due to their child's developmental challenges. However, it is encouraging that most respondents in this study believe that children and young people with intellectual disabilities can achieve significant success in life if provided with adequate support (National Organization of Persons with Disabilities Serbia, 2017).

Method

In this study, data on the needs of young people were collected from their parents. Given the nature of the research participants, it is a convenient sample and belongs to the non-probabilistic type of sample. This method involves selecting participants based on a specific characteristic that defines the target population. In this study, the specific characteristic is that participants are parents of young people with intellectual disabilities. This selection ensures that participants can provide the most comprehensive and insightful responses regarding the challenges and a deeper understanding of the topic.

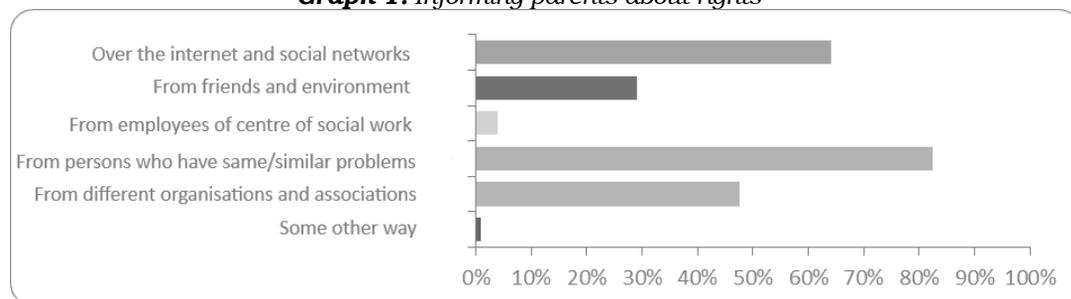
Parents were given the opportunity to respond to a questionnaire designed for this purpose, which was distributed online during April 2024. The questionnaire covered topics related to education, health, and utilization of social services, leisure time, socialization, and social inclusion of adolescents with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, parents were able to indicate the extent to which available social support is sufficient, adequate, and aligned with the needs of young people and their families. They also had the opportunity to highlight necessary changes and improvements through open-ended questions. A total of 103 parents responded to the questionnaire, including 44 parents from Belgrade and 59 parents from Niš. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and an independent samples t-test was employed to examine differences between parents across various parameters. Data analysis was conducted using the IBM SPSS Statistics 23 software package.

Results

Regarding the educational needs of young people, parents participating in this study indicate that the majority of children with intellectual disabilities, 85.4%, have not completed high school. Among those who have finished high school, only two are currently employed, and none have undergone a job preparation program. On the other hand, the majority of parents (86.4%) believe that job preparation programs are essential for better preparing young individuals with intellectual disabilities for

employment. Additionally, all respondents agree that employers should be educated about the needs of young people from this target group. Regarding services intended for adolescents with intellectual disabilities, the largest percentage of parents believe that there are no such services available in their community - 39.8%, while 35.9% are unaware of the existence of these services. Just under a quarter of respondents, 24.2%, report that services for young people with intellectual disabilities do exist.

Graph 1: Informing parents about rights

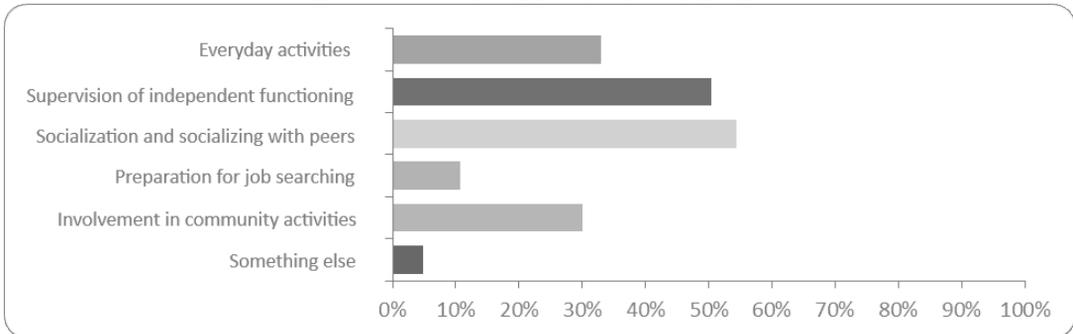


(Source: author's own preparations)

When it comes to the primary sources of information for parents about rights to specific social welfare services intended for young people with intellectual disabilities, *Graph 1* shows that the largest number of parents obtain information from other individuals with similar issues (82.6%), followed by the internet and social media. The smallest percentage of parents receives information from employees of the Social Welfare Centre, at 3.9%. Just over a quarter of respondents (28.2%) are unfamiliar with both the content and the methods of accessing social welfare services intended for children and adolescents with developmental disabilities. Only 4.9% of parents believe that the available social welfare services fully meet their child's support needs. Regarding specific social welfare services, 60.2% of parents report that their child does not have access to personal assistance support. When asked about the areas where their child requires the most support in functioning, parents identified socialization and peer interaction (54.4%) as well as supervision in independent functioning (50.5%). Regarding the health needs of young people, parents predominantly report that they have access to all necessary health services for their child in their community (76.7%). However, opinions are divided on whether they receive all the required information from doctors regarding their child's health status. On a scale from 1 to 5, parents rate the accessibility of health services with an average score of 2.7. Statistically significant differences were observed in responses between male and female respondents, with males rating the accessibility of health services higher. Additionally, there were differences between respondents from Belgrade and Niš, with respondents from Niš considering health services to be more accessible

compared to those from Belgrade. Aside from the aforementioned, when discussing the areas where their child needs the most support in functioning, parents identify socialization and interaction with peers (54.4%) and supervision in independent functioning (50.5%), as shown in *Graph 2*.

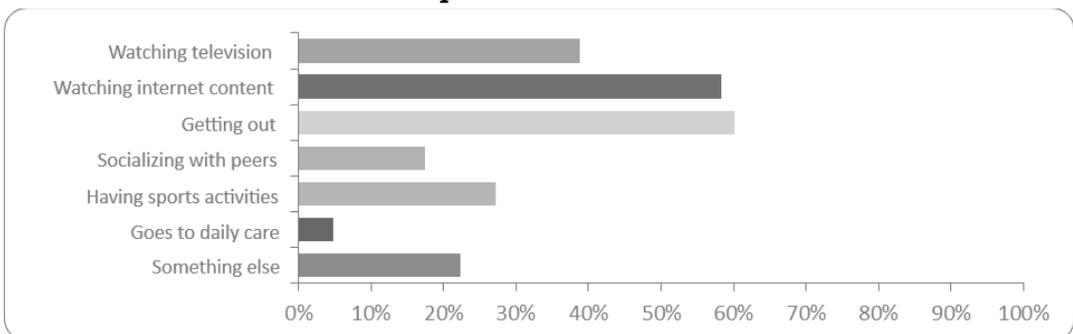
Graph 2: *Fields of support for young people*



(Source: author's own preparations)

Graph 3 illustrates how young people with disabilities spend their leisure time and their social interactions. The largest percentage of parents report that their children use their free time by going outside (60.2%) and watching content on the internet (58.3%), while the smallest percentage of young people attend a day centre (4.9%). Consistent with the responses to the previous question, most parents believe that their children most enjoy walking (78.7%) and watching television and internet content (55.3%). Nearly half of the respondents report that their child has contact with peers only during school hours (49.5%), while 12.6% of parents state that their child has no contact with peers at all.

Graph 3: *Leisure time*

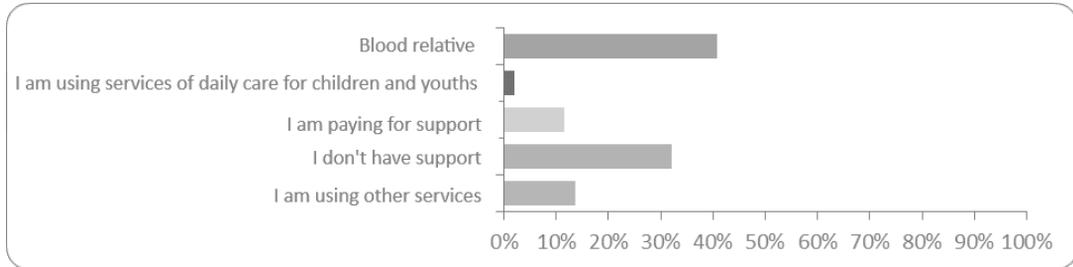


(Source: author's own preparations)

On a scale of 1 to 5, parents rate their child's integration into the community with an average score of 2.5, and the utilization of available community resources with an average score of 2.4. Statistically significant differences were observed between male and female respondents as well as between respondents from Belgrade and Niš. Fathers rate their child's

integration into the community and the use of community resources higher than mothers, while respondents from Niš give higher average scores for both statements compared to those from Belgrade. Parents also report that they receive the most support in raising their child from relatives (40.8%), while 32% of respondents state they receive no support at all. A total of four respondents indicated using the personal assistant service, two parents reported using the day centre service for children and adolescents with developmental difficulties, and one parent reported using respite care (Graph 4).

Graph 4: Support for parents in raising their child



(Source: author's own preparations)

When it comes to parents' responses to different segments of support, respondents rated statements on a scale from 1 to 5 regarding their relevance. The highest average score was given to the statement „I feel overwhelmed in the parenting role“– 3.88, while the lowest score was for „We have access to free support from a special educator or speech therapist“– 1.82 (Table 1).

Table 1: Average Ratings of Respondents on Statements

Statement	N	AS
We have access to free support from specialists, such as defectologists and speech therapists.	103	1.82
I receive support in caring for my child.	103	2.14
I feel lonely in the community where we live.	103	3.38
I feel exhausted in my parenting role.	103	3.88
I need additional psychological support to overcome the daily challenges I face.	103	3.75
When I need a “break”, I have someone who can take care of my child.	103	2.64
We have enough money to pay for treatments and services for our child.	103	2.21
I can work without interruptions because my child is cared for during the day.	103	2.13
The environment we live in understands my child's needs.	103	2.85

(Source: author's own preparations)

In this case, several statements showed statistically significant differences between male and female respondents. Fathers provided higher average scores for statements such as “I have support in caring for my child“, “I can work without interruptions because my child is taken care of during the day“ and “The environment we live in understands my child's needs“. On the other hand, mothers rated the statements “I feel exhausted in my parenting

role“ and *“I need additional psychological support to cope with the daily challenges I face“* higher than fathers. Additionally, for the statement *“I feel lonely in the community where we live“*, a statistically significant difference was observed between employed and unemployed parents, with unemployed parents giving higher scores compared to their employed counterparts.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The completion of the educational process and the transition from a school environment to the world of work or further education can pose a challenge for any adolescent. However, for young people with developmental disabilities, this transition can be particularly difficult, both for them and their families. One reason for increased stress in these families is the additional burden related to various challenges, such as finding, coordinating, and financing different services for adults. Young people with developmental disabilities and their families often have to become advocates for services and support after leaving the educational system (Hetherington, Durant-Jones, and Johnson, 2010; Austin, 2000). Considering this, they argue that the process of preparing for the transition into adulthood should be based on coordinated planning, collaboration, and making concrete decisions for each individual. This process should involve not only the young person and family members but also stakeholders from educational institutions and community service providers (Hetherington, Durant-Jones, and Johnson, 2010; Austin, 2000).

However, research conducted in the cities of Belgrade and Niš revealed that after completing secondary school, the majority of adolescents with intellectual disabilities are left without support, with the burden of care once again falling on family members. Parents who participated in the study pointed out that the current system lacks tailored programs that can adequately meet the needs of both young people and their families in both cities. The available programs and services are primarily focused on providing day care centres in both Belgrade and Niš. However, these centres often lack sufficient capacity, resulting in waiting lists for accessing the service. Furthermore, the activities offered at these centres are not specifically designed for young people with intellectual disabilities. Parents also emphasized the need to develop new services tailored to the needs of adolescents with intellectual disabilities, including the development of social and healthcare services. Some parents noted that their children do not have friends and lack a social life, with limited contact with peers outside the school system, which mirrors findings from a similar study conducted in Norway in 2023. The Norwegian study found a high percentage of parents reporting that their child had no friends and that they made efforts to involve their child in their own social lives to compensate for the lack of acceptance from others. This situation, as the research shows, leads to weakened mental health and

burnout among parents (Skagestad, Østensjø, and Ulvik, 2023). Parents in these circumstances rely on various resources, which seem fragmented when it comes to comprehensive support. A lack of daytime activities and reduced opportunities for social interaction after finishing school may limit physical activity and increase sedentary behaviour (Hamilton, Mazzucchelli and Sanders, 2015). This combination can lead to negative physical health outcomes for young people as they transition from school to adult life (Luftig and Muthert, 2005). Our research findings also confirmed that young people spend most of their free time in unstructured activities, such as going outside or watching content online.

The transition from school to adult life can significantly affect mental health and well-being, as it marks a major change in a young person's life. Leaving behind the structured environment of school can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, especially if the young person has no activities to fill the void left by school, a situation more common among those with intellectual disabilities. The expectations to assume adult roles or the possible absence of such expectations for individuals with intellectual disabilities can create familial tensions, contributing to poor mental health outcomes (Foley et al., 2012). Adapting to new adult roles and shifting family and peer group dynamics can be particularly stressful and isolating, especially if cognitive deficits or social stigma prevent the young person from fulfilling expected adult roles. This situation can result in a particularly challenging emotional and psychological period (Cooper et al., 2016). A specific area identified through the research on the needs of young people in Belgrade and Niš is the establishment of support services for family members, particularly mothers, given the significant challenges they face throughout the upbringing of a young person. The findings suggest that these families primarily rely on their own resources, with one-third of respondents stating they receive no support, while those who do receive support primarily rely on relatives. In this regard, emphasis is placed on the need for psychological support and the provision of respite care services. An interesting aspect of parental support revealed gender differences in the responses. Most mothers reported having little to no support, whereas fathers generally stated they received sufficient understanding from their environment and were able to work without disruption. These findings are significant as they highlight the potential overburdening of mothers with caregiving responsibilities, often leading to their withdrawal from the labour market. Combined with the lack of support services, this can result in fatigue in fulfilling parental duties. Another research has also confirmed that it is essential to building a strong and effective support network for this vulnerable population (Skrobić and Vranić, 2024).

Existing services within the social welfare system that could potentially be applied to this target group are also not being utilized sufficiently. An

example of this is the home care service, which, although prescribed by the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions and Standards for the Provision of Social welfare Services for children and young people with developmental disabilities, is primarily provided automatically to adults and the elderly. In this context, it would be necessary to improve the standards for providing this service, as well as the practices and development of the service, to increase its availability and coverage for adolescents with intellectual disabilities. Another recognized need in terms of services is the expansion of the personal assistant service to include young people who have completed their education. To better map and address needs, as well as monitor the quality of service provision, it is important to enhance the existing system of monitoring and recording young people who use various social welfare services.

Regarding the employment of young people from this target group, it is evident that there are no programs designed to prepare them for the labour market, nor are there programs to support their adjustment process in the workplace. Additionally, the data indicate that the jobs young people are involved in are often not aligned with their potential or adapted to their capabilities, which can negatively impact their long-term motivation to work and attend their job. Even when they do find employment, their earnings are often modest and insufficient to meet basic living needs (Nicoricou and Elliot, 2023). Another study (Ivey, 2004) showed that parents are most concerned about whether their child will have secure housing, developed social networks, and constructive leisure activities in adulthood. Additionally, concerns related to the transition to adulthood also included the ability to take care of themselves, while issues related to sexuality preoccupied a group of parents. Alongside the development of employment preparation programs, it would be important to create programs aimed at raising awareness among employers about the needs of adolescents with intellectual disabilities. Employers often lack sufficient information and skills regarding this group. In this regard, professional monitoring is also crucial to provide support to the young person and assist them in adjusting to the demands of the work environment.

Another significant aspect identified is the issue of service funding and ensuring stability in that area. Improving the funding mechanism would increase the availability of services, ensure the sustainability of existing ones, and foster the development of new services. This would provide families with continuous support, which is crucial for enabling adolescents with intellectual disabilities to reach their potential in the communities where they live. In their work, Leonard and other authors also identified three possible strategies that could be beneficial for the transition of adolescents with intellectual disabilities. They noted that parents recognized the importance of young people receiving more information on financial assistance, having access to programs for independence training, and building informal

community support. The research also highlighted parents' concerns about these young adults' ability to adapt to the changes brought by adult life, their difficulties navigating services and programs, challenges in establishing social relationships, and tensions within family functioning, all of which negatively affect family well-being. Financial challenges and concerns about long-term future prospects were also prevalent among the parents who participated in this study (Leonard et al., 2016). In their work, Matković and Stranjaković emphasized that social welfare services, particularly community-based day services and independent living support, play a crucial role in this process, as they are based on the child's right to live in a family and on providing support to prevent institutional placement of children and young people (Matković and Stranjaković, 2020).

The findings of our study underscore a critical gap between international human rights standards and the daily lived experiences of families in Serbia. To bridge this gap, the transition to adulthood must be redefined as a guaranteed entitlement. Inclusivity is not achieved merely by the absence of segregation, but by the presence of proactive, tailored support systems that foster self-determination. Moving forward, policy reforms in Serbia must transition from a 'care' perspective to an 'empowerment' perspective, ensuring that every young person with an intellectual disability can transition not into isolation, but into a life of dignity and active citizenship.

Given the above, it is essential to develop a variety of services that cater to the specific needs of young people with developmental disabilities or impairments, as well as their families. If families are not supported during the transition to adulthood, the overall well-being of these young people may be (further) jeopardized. The research revealed that parents face significant difficulties transitioning from a relatively integrated child care system to a fragmented, uncoordinated, and inconsistent system of care for adults with various intellectual disabilities and/or disabilities. Additionally, despite the widespread discussion of inclusive practices, the study showed that social practices within communities are often incompatible with the legal frameworks intended to guarantee the protection of basic human rights. In this regard, the findings of this research can serve as a starting point for discussions on more proactive mechanisms for protecting this group of young people, as well as ensuring their rights are upheld into adulthood.

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Socio-Economic Integration, Identity, and Belonging among Romanians in Austria

Marian Ionel Cutoi¹

Abstract

Intra-EU migration of Romanians to Austria has intensified since Romania's accession to the European Union, influencing both the socio-economic profile of the community and its relationship with the host society. The article analyses the socio-economic integration of Romanians in Austria through a mixed quantitative approach that combines official statistical data with an online survey conducted with 241 respondents from all nine administrative regions. The results point to a relatively robust level of economic integration, reflected in high employment rates, occupational diversification, and strong satisfaction with work and financial circumstances. At the same time, unemployment rates remain higher than those recorded among Austrian citizens, signalling persistent vulnerabilities. Social-educational integration appears more heterogeneous and is contingent upon German language proficiency, social networks, and experiences of discrimination. The survey data support the presence of functional bilingualism, with German predominating in professional contexts and Romanian in the family sphere, while mixed language use is frequently reported within friendship circles. The prevailing pattern is that of a mixed lifestyle and dual belonging, aligned with a transnational interpretation in which structural integration coexists with active and sustained ties to Romania.

Keywords

Migration, socio-economic integration, Romanian community, transnationalism, labour market

1. Introduction

Intra-EU migration within the EU has amplified labour mobility and consolidated relatively stable flows between origin and destination societies. In this context, Austria has experienced a steady increase in migration from Central and Eastern Europe, and the Romanian community has emerged as one of the significant components of this development, with a visible presence in demographic dynamics and the labour market. As of 1 January

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2024, Romanian citizens constituted the second largest community of foreign residents in Austria (153,427 persons), after German citizens (Statistik Austria, 2024: 25). The growth of the Romanian community in Austria reflects two distinct phases of the post-communist transition: the immediate mobility following 1989 and the intensification of flows after Romania's accession to the EU in 2007. The expansion of employment opportunities and the intra-EU mobility framework have reinforced this trend, contributing to long-term settlement and to the increased visibility of Romanians within the resident population and across diverse economic sectors.

Socio-economic integration of migrants is a complex and multidimensional process, shaped by factors such as educational attainment, professional qualifications, language competences, access to services, residential stability, and patterns of interaction with the local population. In the case of the Romanian community, economic integration is generally favourable, supported both by labour demand in specific sectors and by a high degree of professional adaptability. By contrast, social and cultural integration follows a more variable trajectory, being influenced by individual experiences, the gradual development of social relations, and the negotiation of identity positions between the origin and destination societies. A defining aspect of this process is the transnational dimension of belonging, whereby the adoption of host-society practices coexists with the preservation of language, traditions, and social networks connected to the country of origin. Within this framework, analysing the socio-economic integration of the Romanian community in Austria becomes essential for understanding the contributions of this group to the host economy and society, as well as for identifying the persistent challenges of the integration process. This article examines these dimensions through an approach that combines statistical data with sociological evidence, offering insight into the dynamics of Romanian integration in Austria and their role within the broader context of contemporary European mobility.

2. Methodology

The study employs a quantitative research design based on the triangulation of official secondary data with primary survey data, in order to analyse the socio-economic integration of Romanians in Austria through both objective indicators and subjective perceptions.

The first component consists of a descriptive analysis of statistical data provided by institutions such as Statistik Austria, Eurostat, and other relevant public databases, complemented, where appropriate, with comparative benchmarks from Romania (National Institute of Statistics, INS). The analysis draws on demographic indicators, employment and

unemployment rates, occupational structure, educational attainment, and indicators concerning language competences. Data processing focused on identifying longitudinal trends within the Romanian community and comparing its socio-economic profile with the overall Austrian population and with other immigrant groups. The analysis was conducted using descriptive statistical procedures and table-based data processing tools (Excel and Google Sheets).

The second methodological component consists of an online survey administered to members of the Romanian community in Austria, aiming to capture the subjective dimensions of integration, perceptions of economic situation, social relations, cultural belonging, experiences of discrimination, and intentions regarding long-term settlement. The questionnaire was completed by 241 participants aged between 15 and 61, drawn from all nine administrative regions. Dissemination was conducted online, through social networks and digital platforms used by the community. The sample is non-probabilistic and based on self-selection; therefore, the findings do not allow for statistical generalisation, but they provide empirically relevant indications of internal trends and variations across subgroups. The survey included 29 questions organised into five thematic blocks: socio-demographic data; economic integration and occupational satisfaction; language competences and social interactions; identity and cultural belonging; and perceptions of discrimination and quality of life. The analysis comprised descriptive distributions and comparisons between subgroups (age, gender, etc.), and the results were interpreted alongside official indicators in order to assess convergences and to contextualise the differences observed.

The research is temporally delimited to the period 2021–2024, in line with the availability of statistical data and the timing of the survey administration. Spatially, the analysis covers the entire territory of Austria. Methodological limitations include the non-probabilistic nature of the sample, the potential subjectivity of respondents' answers, and the inability to capture all dimensions of integration through a single instrument.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis brings together three perspectives: neoclassical migration theory, network theory, and transnationalism. These are complemented by a constructivist approach to identity.

At a general level, the concept of integration is understood in the sense proposed by Esser and Heckmann, as a multidimensional process combining structural integration (labour market, education), cultural integration (language, values), social integration (relationships and

participation), and identificational integration (Esser, 2000: 265; 2006: 7–11; Heckmann, 1997: 1). Schneider and Crul (2010: 1145) emphasise structural components as central indicators of integration, while Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx (2016: 14) distinguish between integration at the legal–political, socio-economic, and cultural–religious levels.

Neoclassical economic migration theory frames the economic dimension of integration. At the macro level, migration is driven by development gaps and the unequal distribution of income and employment opportunities across regions (Lewis, 1954: 189; Hicks, 1963: 76; Castles & Miller, 2009: 199), generating flows from low-wage, labour-surplus areas to higher-wage economies with labour shortages. At the micro level, it is conceptualised as a rational choice that weighs migration costs (financial, social, cultural) against expected long-term returns (Sjaastad, 1962: 82–83; De Haas, 2011: 9). Education, qualifications, and experience function as human capital, yielding context-dependent rewards and shaping destination choice through anticipated productivity and earnings (Schultz, 1961: 2; Becker, 1994: 245; Borjas, 1987: 27). In intra-EU mobility, lower mobility barriers further reduce costs and heighten the salience of wage differentials. This approach informs the interpretation of economic integration indicators such as employment, skills, and entrepreneurship.

Migration network (social capital) theory explains the mechanisms through which migration is sustained and structured over time, beyond individual economic motivations. Ritchey (1976: 389) and Massey et al. (1993: 450) show that, once migratory flows are initiated, networks of family, friendship, and acquaintanceship develop, linking places of origin and destination. Fawcett (1989: 678) distinguishes between family ties, institutional ties, and mass cultural ties, emphasising the role of the family and the immediate social circle as privileged channels of information and support. Stark and Jakubek (2012: 15) describe these networks as forms of informal cooperation, including financial support, which reduce costs and risks for newcomers, while Simon (2019: 3) and Blumenstock et al. (2023: 31) highlight that, once established, they tend to self-reproduce migration. Family ties, informal support, organisational participation, and language practices empirically reflect migrants' social capital.

Transnationalism theory provides the framework for analysing socio-cultural dimensions and the ties maintained with Romania. Schiller, Basch, and Blanc (1995: 48) define transnationalism as the process through which migrants build and sustain social relations that simultaneously connect the country of origin and the country of destination. Portes (1997: 16; 2016: 83) emphasises that transnational migrants lead a dual lifestyle, being integrated into the host economy and society while remaining economically, socially, and symbolically engaged

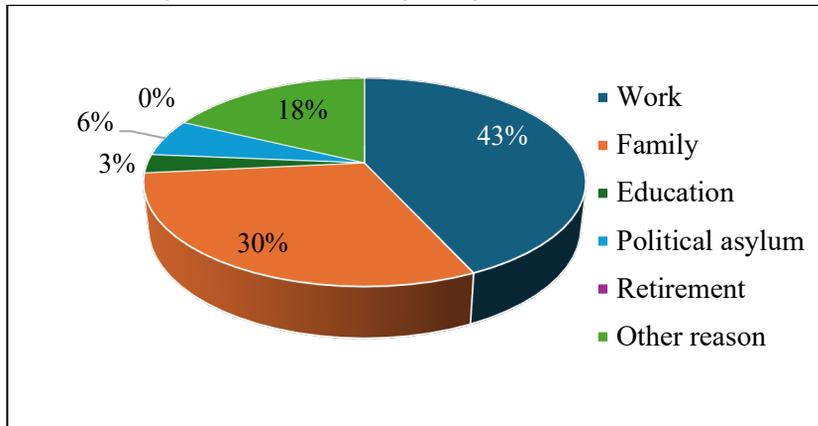
with the origin context through remittances, investments, community participation, and settlement intentions oriented towards the country of origin. In the Romanian context, Sandu (2010: 100) describes the “social worlds of Romanian migration” as networks linking communities at home with those abroad, while Ducu (2018: 68) highlights the dynamics of transnational families and the ways in which they distribute their lives across two social spaces.

A constructivist perspective on identity complements this framework by providing conceptual tools for analysing processes of belonging and hybrid identities. Wendt (1992: 397) and Checkel (1998: 327–338) argue that actors’ identities and interests are not given but are constructed through interaction with the social environment, dominant norms, and others’ expectations. In the context of European migration, Strey et al. (2018: 35) highlight that mobility decisions and orientations towards the host society are shaped not only by economic factors, but also by perceptions of lifestyle, opportunities, and values. Cormoş (2011: 48), Sandu (2010: 167), and Ducu (2018: 68) argue that migration reshapes identity by combining origin-culture references with host-society elements, especially among the second generation.

In conclusion, the integration of Romanians in Austria is approached here as a multidimensional process, shaped by the interaction between economic motivations, the role of networks and social capital in accessing resources, the maintenance of transnational ties, and the negotiation of identity and belonging within a new socio-cultural context

4. Migration Drivers

Migration motivations are relevant for interpreting integration, as they influence both labour market entry and stabilisation within the host society. Labour migration tends to accelerate economic integration, while family migration supports the consolidation of social networks and residential stability. In this sense, integration indicators are contextualised through respondents stated reasons for migration and their length of residence. The survey data show that most respondents have long-term residence in Austria, with 79% reporting more than ten years, suggesting that the findings on employment, unemployment, and occupational positioning primarily reflect the experiences of individuals with sustained exposure to the labour market and to the institutions of the host society. Accordingly, the distribution of motivations indicates, for a substantial segment of the community, a shift from initial mobility to long-term settlement.

Figure 1: *Main reason for migration to Austria*

(Source: author's own preparations based on the author's survey)

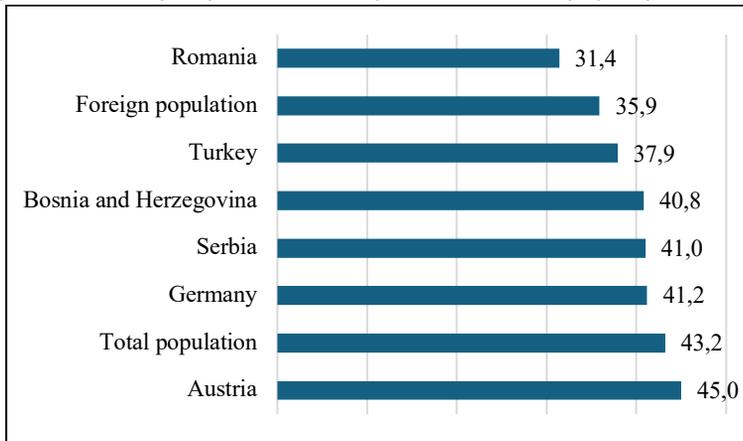
The distribution of motivations indicates a migration profile dominated by economic considerations, complemented by family-related factors. Employment is the primary reason for 43% of respondents, a finding consistent with neoclassical economic interpretations of migration, in which mobility is associated with the expansion of employment opportunities and the reduction of material vulnerabilities. Family constitutes the second most frequent motivation (30%), suggesting the importance of reunification and relational support in the decision to migrate. From the perspective of network theory, this proportion reflects the role of family ties and informal support in reducing the costs and uncertainties associated with relocation. Considered in relation to the long-term residence reported by most respondents, the family dimension can also be interpreted as a factor contributing to the community's long-term consolidation. The category "other reason" accounts for 18%, indicating the diversity of migration determinants that are not fully captured by employment- or family-related factors. Study-related migration appears only marginally (3%), suggesting that Austria is perceived primarily as a destination for work and settlement. Political motives, reported by 6%, point to the persistence of departure reasons linked to the historical contexts of Romanian migration. The "retirement" motive is not reported (0%), which supports the interpretation of a predominantly economically active community and reinforces the relevance of economic indicators in analysing integration. Overall, the combination of largely long-term residence and motivations centred on work and family provides the interpretative framework for the following sections on labour market integration and the occupational profile of the Romanian community in Austria.

5. Economic Integration

Over the past two decades, migration has consistently shaped Austria's demographic structure and labour market. In 2023, the population exceeded 9.1 million, while the number of resident foreign nationals increased from 730,261 (2002) to 1,729,820 (2023), reaching approximately 19% of the total population (Statistik Austria 2024). Within this context, the population holding Romanian citizenship has consolidated as one of the largest communities: in 2023, 147,490 Romanian citizens were registered, and as of 1 January 2024 the resident numbers rose to 153,427, placing Romanians second among foreign nationalities after Germans (Statistik Austria, 2024: 25). To maintain comparability with the available socio-economic indicators, the present analysis draws primarily on data for 2023 and examines the integration of Romanians into the Austrian labour market and the main characteristics of their economic integration.

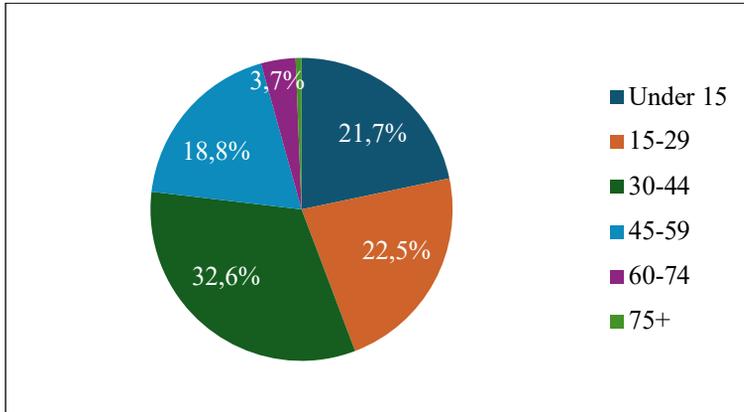
Age structure is a relevant structural variable for economic integration, as it shapes the size and dynamics of the working-age population. In Austria, the difference between the native-born population and the foreign-origin population is visible in terms of average age: the population without a foreign background has a mean age of 45 years, whereas the foreign population has a mean age of 35.9 years (Statistik Austria, 2023: 27).

Figure 2: Average age in Austria by selected country of origin (2023)



(Source: author's own preparations based on Statistik Austria, 2023:27)

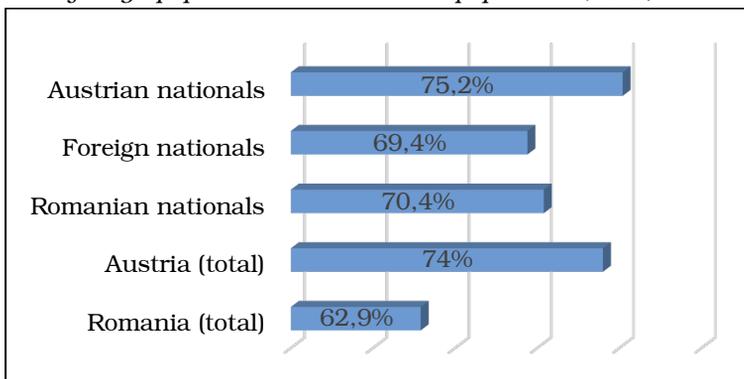
The Romanian community stands out with a mean age of 31.4 years, placing it among the youngest communities analysed. The contrast with the Austrian population, characterised by pronounced demographic ageing, is relevant for understanding the role of migration in supplementing the labour force. An age-group breakdown indicates that more than 75% of Romanians in Austria are under 44 years of age, suggesting a substantial base of individuals in age ranges with a high likelihood of labour market participation.

Figure 3: Age distribution of Romanians in Austria (2023)

(Source: author's own preparations based on Statistik Austria, Statistical Database)

From an administrative perspective, labour market participation typically begins at the age of 15 (Business Service Portal, Working Hours for Young People, 2023), provided that the minimum compulsory level of education has been completed, while labour market exit is linked to the statutory retirement age. In the case of the Romanian community, the age structure indicates 21.7% of individuals under 15 and 4.3% aged 60 and over, resulting in a share of 73.9% for the 15–59 age group (based on the available grouping). This demographic profile indicates a broad working-age base, helping explain the employment levels outlined in the following subsections.

To assess the economic integration of Romanians in Austria, the employment rate serves as a key indicator. Figure 4 compares Austria and Romania and benchmarks Romanians in Austria against the foreign and native-born populations, situating the community relative to the main reference groups.

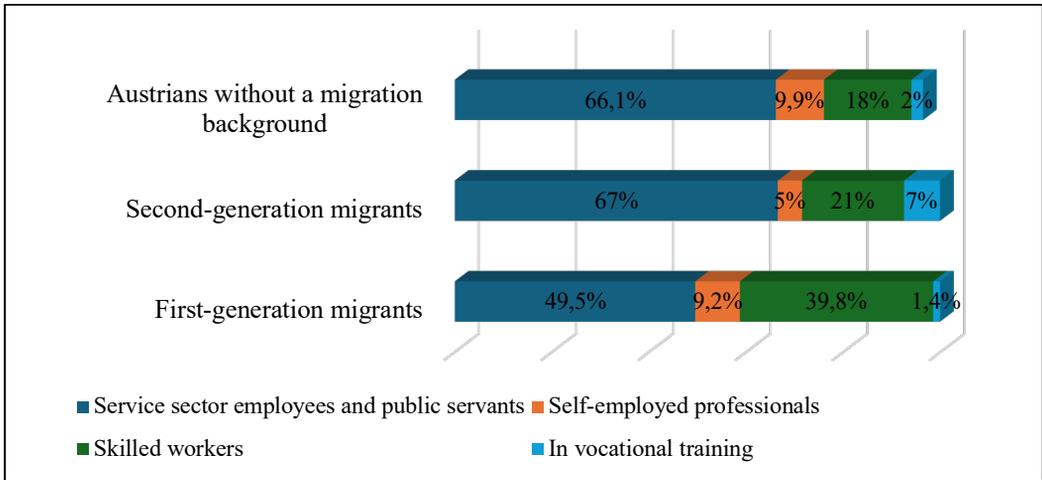
Figure 4: Employment rate: Romanians in Austria compared with Romania, Austria, the foreign population and the native population (2023)

(Source: author's own preparations based on Statistik Austria and INS, 2023)

The data show that in 2023 the employment rate was significantly higher in Austria (74.0%) than in Romania (62.9%). At the same time, Romanians in Austria recorded an employment rate of 70.4%, i.e. 7.5 percentage points above the level in Romania, indicating more favourable labour market incorporation in the Austrian context. However, relative to Austria’s internal benchmarks, Romanians remain below the national average (74.0%) and the native-born rate (75.2%), suggesting a persistent gap relative to the majority population. Relative to the foreign population overall, Romanians display a slightly higher employment rate (70.4% versus 69.4%), placing the community marginally above the migrant average in terms of economic integration as measured by employment.

Beyond the overall level of employment, economic integration can also be examined through occupational structure, as the distribution across occupational categories indicates the relative positioning of different groups within the labour market hierarchy. Figure 5 compares the occupational profiles of first-generation migrants, second-generation migrants, and Austrians without a migrant background across four categories: service-sector employees and civil servants, self-employed professionals, skilled workers, and individuals in vocational training.

Figure 5: Employment domains by migrant generation: first generation, second generation, and Austrians without a migration background



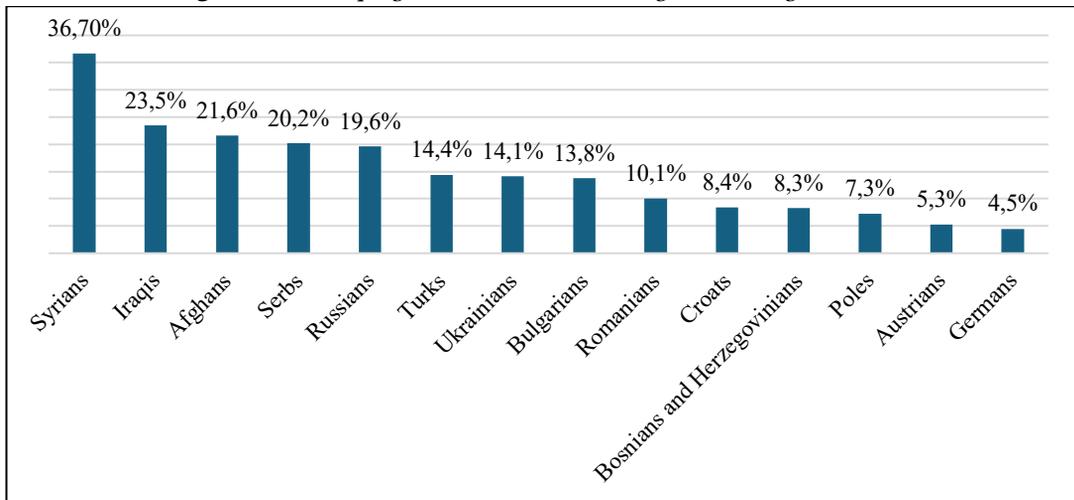
(Source: author’s own preparations based on Statistik Austria, 2023: 57)

The data reveal clear intergenerational differences. First-generation migrants are more strongly concentrated in the category of skilled workers (39.8%) and have a lower share in services (49.5%), a profile that suggests predominantly operational labour market insertion. By contrast, the second generation more closely resembles the structure of the native-born population: the share employed in services and the public sector rises to

67%, comparable to that of Austrians without a migrant background (66.1%), while the proportion of skilled workers declines to 21% (compared with 18% among the native-born). A further relevant difference concerns vocational training, where the second generation displays a higher share (7%) than the native-born (2%) and the first generation (1.4%), indicating stronger integration into local educational and occupational pathways. Overall, the shift from the first to the second-generation points to a pattern of intergenerational mobility, whereby younger generations move towards occupational segments with relatively higher status and greater convergence with the profile of the native-born population.

A second key indicator of economic integration is the unemployment rate, as it captures difficulties in accessing and retaining employment, as well as group-specific vulnerabilities within the labour market. In 2023, the national unemployment rate in Austria was 6.4%, while the average among foreign citizens stood at 9.6%, and for Romanian citizens at 10.1%, indicating a gap between the native-born population and a substantial segment of the population with a migrant background. The figure below compares unemployment rates by nationality in order to highlight the positioning of Romanians relative to the main reference groups.

Figure 6: Unemployment rate in Austria by nationality (2023)



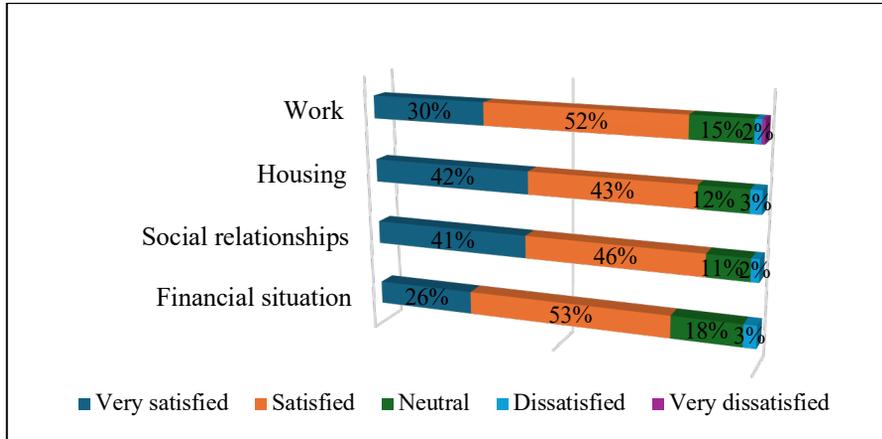
(Source: author's own preparations based on Expert Council on Integration, 2024: 44)

The data show that, apart from the German community, which records an unemployment rate even lower than that of Austrian citizens, all other nationalities analysed display values above the level observed among the Austrian population. When interpreting the comparison with the “average of foreign citizens”, it is important to note that this average is influenced by the German community, which is both the largest group of foreign nationals in Austria and the group with the lowest unemployment

rate. One explanatory factor is the linguistic advantage associated with German as a mother tongue, which reduces the costs of labour market integration and facilitates access to more stable employment. In this context, Romanian citizens register an unemployment rate of 10.1%, above the national average and slightly above the average for the foreign population, yet below the levels recorded for several other migrant communities. Compared with groups more exposed to unemployment risk, Romanians occupy a relatively more favourable position than Bulgarians (13.8%), Ukrainians (14.1%), Turks (14.4%), and Serbs (20.2%). At the same time, the magnitude of variation across nationalities, ranging from 36.7% in the case of Syrians to 4.5% in the case of Germans, suggests the existence of distinct segments of labour market integration, shaped by factors such as time of arrival, residence status, human capital, and access to networks and opportunities.

Economic integration is not expressed solely through employment and the reduction of unemployment risk, but also through active participation in the local economy as initiators of economic activities. Beyond their incorporation as a labour force, the Romanian community in Austria also emerges as an economic actor through entrepreneurial initiatives, with direct effects on employment and on the diversification of the local economy. According to a report by the Vienna Chamber of Commerce, in 2022 foreign nationals played an important role in the Austrian economy, with the number of newly established firms reaching 9,051, an estimated market value of €2.4 billion, and an impact of approximately 17,200 jobs. At the same time, 46% of these firms were founded by a foreign national, and Romanians were the best-represented group in this context (press release, 5 August 2023). This entrepreneurial dynamic points to the community's capacity to adapt and to consolidate its socio-economic position through initiatives that generate employment and strengthen economic connectivity between the origin and destination contexts.

In addition to objective indicators of economic integration (employment, unemployment, and occupational positioning), the subjective dimension is relevant for understanding long-term stabilisation. Satisfaction functions as an indicator of the intention to remain and of the continuity of the integration process, as it reflects individuals' assessments of their lived experience in the host society. In this respect, the survey examined four areas relevant to integration, with particular emphasis on two dimensions directly linked to economic integration, namely satisfaction with one's job and satisfaction with one's financial situation, complemented by assessments of the housing environment and social relations.

Figure 7: Self-reported satisfaction across key life domains

(Source: author's own preparations based on author's survey)

Regarding job satisfaction, 82% of Romanian respondents report being satisfied or very satisfied, indicating a positive assessment of their professional experience in Austria. In comparative terms, this finding stands out relative to the relevant benchmarks (Arbeitsklima Index 2024), exceeding both the national average level of job satisfaction (72.5%) and the values reported for the foreign population (67.5%) and for individuals without a migrant background (74%). The gap relative to these reference points suggests that, for Romanian citizens, professional integration is perceived as functional and associated with meaningful benefits, such as a more favourable workplace climate, opportunities for development, and positive interpersonal relations at work.

Satisfaction with one's financial situation points to the same positive orientation. In the survey conducted within the Romanian community, 79% of respondents report being satisfied or very satisfied, while the share of those dissatisfied is 3%. By comparison, in Statistik Austria benchmark data, the proportion of dissatisfied respondents is considerably higher (24.9%), indicating a gap between the sample investigated here and the population captured by official surveys. This difference may be related to compositional characteristics of the group under study and to the fact that financial satisfaction is closely associated with occupational status and labour market stability.

With respect to housing conditions, 85% of respondents report being satisfied or very satisfied, a result that converges with the general trend observed in Statistik Austria (Zahlen, Daten und Indikatoren der Wohnstatistik 2022: 40) data regarding high levels of housing satisfaction. In terms of social relations, 87% of respondents indicate high levels of satisfaction, substantially above the available national benchmark (65.3%),

which may reflect the density of intra-community ties and the capacity to build support networks in the destination context (Monika Mühlböck et al., 2022: 28). Overall, high levels of professional and financial satisfaction, supported by favourable assessments of housing and social relations, outline a profile of stabilisation within the Romanian community.

In addition to classical indicators of economic integration, such as employment and unemployment, a further dimension relevant to economic stability and to the linkage between the destination and origin contexts is that of transnational economic practices. Remittances function as a contextual indicator of the capacity to provide financial support to households outside Austria and, implicitly, of the existence of active economic ties with the country of origin.

Table 1: *Remittance Flows from Austria by country of destination (2021)*

(EUR million)	Remittances from Austria
Total remittances	5.859,57
Germany	1.356,7
Serbia	742,8
Hungary	408,31
Romania	294,01
Bosnia and Herzegovina	255,7
Croatia	252,71
Slovakia	245,05
Czechia	149,53
France	145,85
Egypt	135,5
Kosovo	119,48
Slovenia	116,45

(Source: author's elaboration based on data provided by Statista)

Data for 2021 indicate that Romania ranks among the main destinations of remittances sent from Austria, amounting to approximately €294 million and placing fourth within the set of countries presented. This positioning suggests the existence of a substantial financial flow between Austria and Romania and is consistent with the interpretation that a segment of migrants maintain economic commitments in their country of origin. From the perspective of economic integration, remittances can be understood as an expression of stabilisation, insofar as financial transfers presuppose labour market integration and a degree of income predictability.

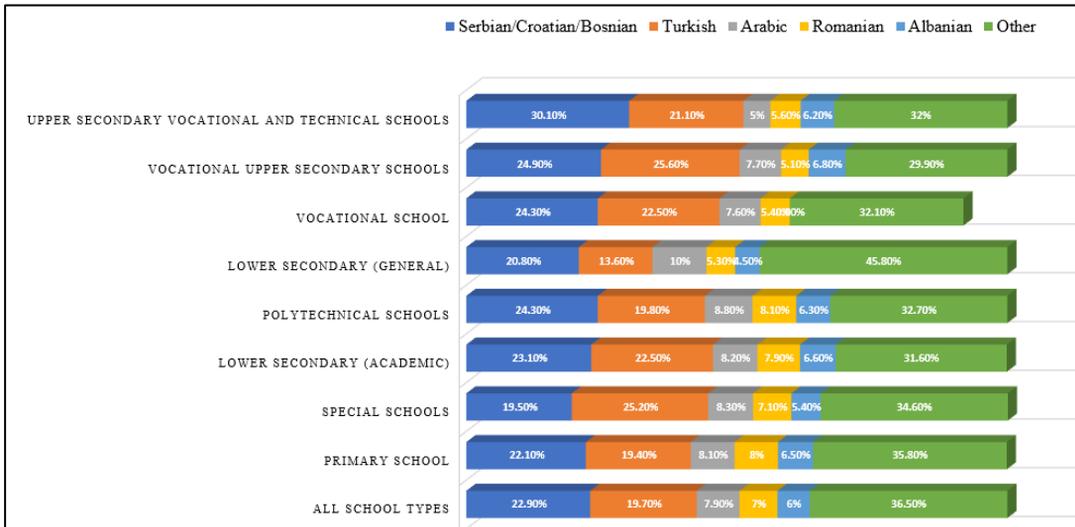
6. Social-Educational Integration

Social-educational integration complements the economic dimension of integration by capturing mechanisms of institutional socialisation and the resources that facilitate participation in the host society. While employment and economic stability indicate structural integration, this dimension more directly reflects the quality of everyday interactions, access to educational

settings, and the capacity to build social relations beyond the community of origin. In this section, the educational component is analysed through indicators relating to the school environment and language competences, while the social component is examined through patterns of language use in everyday contexts and the structure of social networks, including inter-ethnic contacts and associational participation. The indicators are organised across three complementary levels: linguistic diversity in the school environment, language competences and linguistic practices in daily life, and, respectively, inter-ethnic interaction and associational participation as forms of social integration.

A relevant benchmark for social-educational integration is the school environment, where processes of institutional socialisation, the development of language competences, and inter-ethnic contacts are concentrated. The distribution of mother tongues in schools provides an overview of cultural diversity and of the presence of the main communities within the education system.

Figure 8: Mother tongues in schools by school type



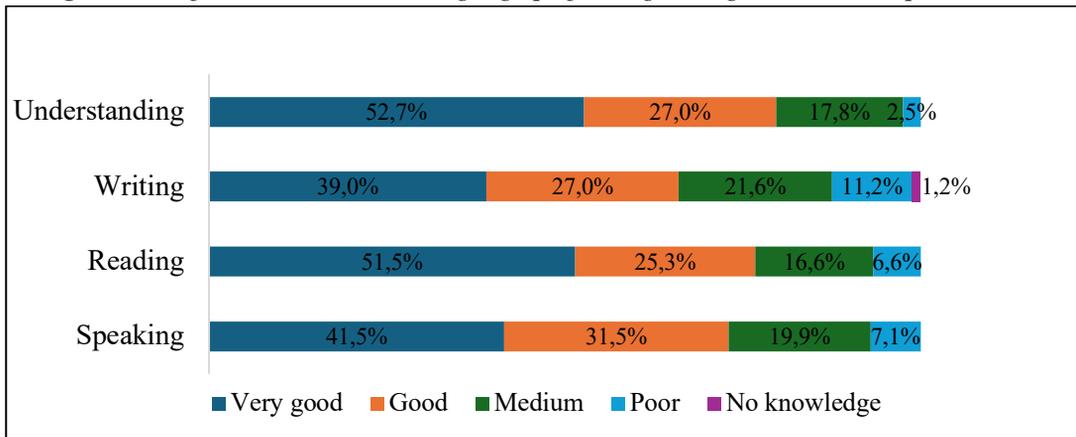
(Source: author’s own preparations based on Expert Council on Integration, 2023: 20)

The data indicate a pronounced multilingual profile within the education system. Across all school types, the most frequent mother tongues are Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian (22.9%) and Turkish (19.7%), followed by Arabic (7.9%), Romanian (7.0%), and Albanian (6.0%), while the category “other languages” accounts for 36.5%. Romanian remains within a relatively stable range across different educational pathways, at around 5.1–8.1%, with higher levels in primary school (8.0%) and in polytechnical schools (8.1%). The fact that Romanian ranks below historically established communities such as the Turkish community or those originating from the

former Yugoslav space may be explained by differences in community maturity: earlier-established groups have benefited from stronger intergenerational continuity, whereas the Romanian community, consolidated more recently, is still in a process of stabilisation and intergenerational transmission.

German language competences constitute a central mechanism of social-educational integration, as they condition access to institutions, educational performance, and the quality of social interactions. In this respect, the survey examined respondents' self-assessed German proficiency across four functional dimensions: understanding, writing, reading, and speaking. The results indicate a high level of language competences among respondents, particularly in dimensions associated with everyday communication.

Figure 9: Self-assessed German language proficiency among Romanian respondents

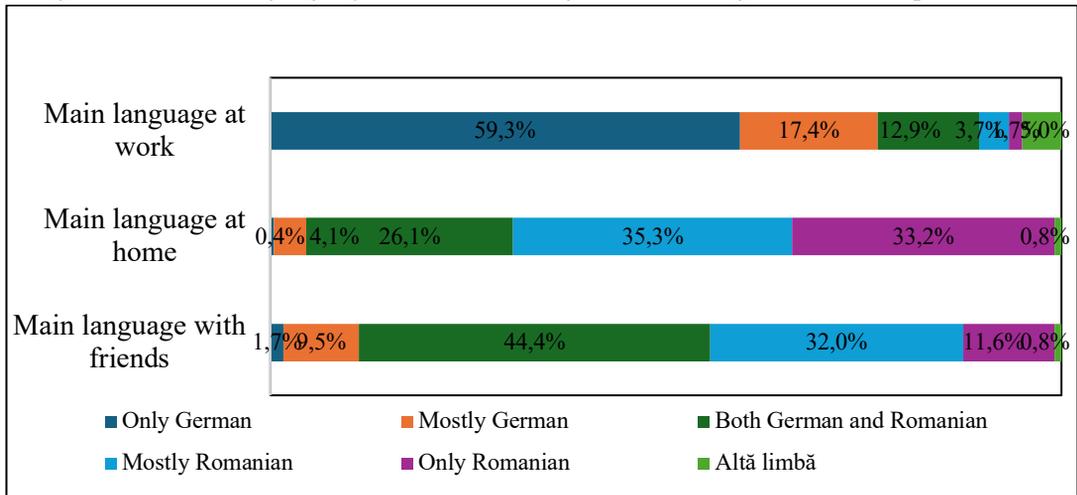


(Source: author's own preparations based on the author's survey)

Regarding understanding, 79.7% rate their skills as good or very good, while for reading the corresponding proportion is 76.8%. For speaking, 73.0% report a good or very good level. Writing remains the relatively more vulnerable dimension: 66.0% indicate a good or very good level, whereas 11.2% report a low level and 1.2% report having no writing skills. In comparative terms, where benchmark data from Statistik Austria surveys are available, the distributions in the sample under study are similar or more favourable (for example, 79.7% versus 73.7% for understanding; 66.0% versus 51.0% for writing; 76.8% versus 64.0% for reading; and 73.0% versus 60.9% for speaking). This profile supports an interpretation of functional linguistic integration within the community, while recognising that the observed differences may also be shaped by the composition of the sample.

Beyond proficiency, linguistic integration is reflected in the actual use of languages across different contexts. In order to capture this practical dimension, the survey examined the predominant language of communication at work, within the family, and among friends.

Figure 10: Main language of communication by context among Romanian respondents



(Source: author's own preparations based on the author's survey)

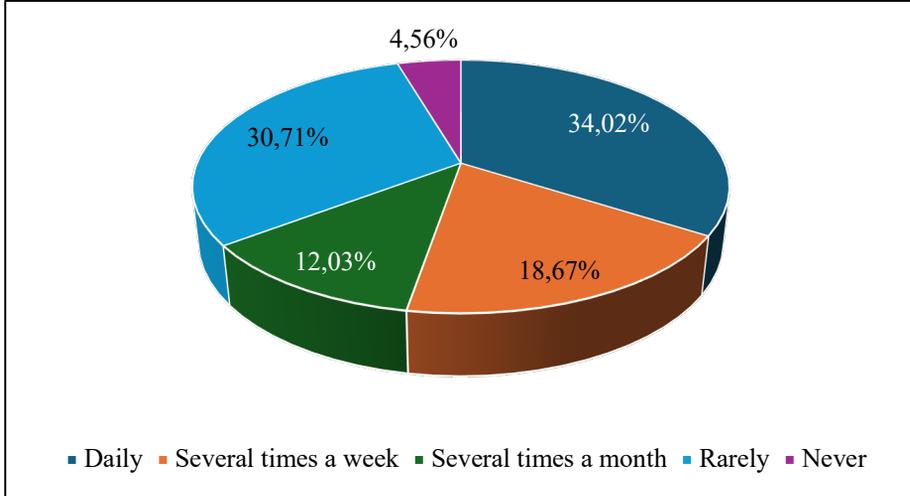
In the workplace, the use of German is dominant: 76.7% report speaking only German or mostly German, and 12.9% use both German and Romanian. Predominant or exclusive use of Romanian in the professional environment is limited (5.4%), while 5.0% report using another language, which also reflects the multilingual character of certain occupational settings. Within the family, Romanian remains predominant: 68.5% report speaking mostly or only Romanian; bilingual use accounts for 26.1%, and predominant or exclusive use of German is marginal at 4.5%. This distribution differs from Statistik Austria benchmark data, where the share reporting predominant use of German in the family is higher (23.3%), suggesting differences between the sample under study and the population captured in official surveys.

Among friends, bilingualism becomes the dominant pattern (44.4%), while 43.6% communicate mostly or only in Romanian and 11.2% mostly or only in German. Compared with Statistik Austria data, the share reporting the use of German in friendship circles is lower in the present survey (11.2% versus 32.3%), which may indicate social networks more densely anchored within the community in the sample under study, alongside the presence of a substantial sphere of bilingual sociability. Overall, the configuration points to contextual adaptation: German predominates in public and professional settings, Romanian remains central within the family, and informal

relational contexts are characterised by bilingual practices that function as a bridge between origin-based identity and integration into the host society.

To assess social integration beyond the institutional setting, the frequency of contact with people of other nationalities outside shared programmes (work, school) is a relevant indicator. This measure captures the extent to which social networks extend beyond the community of origin and develop in a multicultural register.

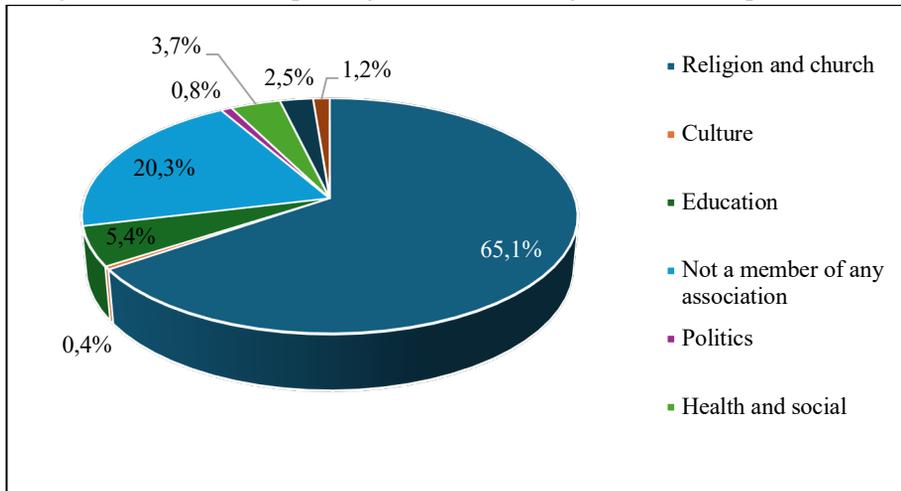
Figure 11: Frequency of contact with people of other nationalities outside shared settings



(Source: author's own preparations based on the author's survey)

The results suggest a high level of inter-ethnic interaction: 34.02% of respondents report daily contact, and 18.67% report contact several times a week. Thus, more than half of respondents indicate frequent interactions with people outside the Romanian community. A further 12.03% report interactions several times a month, while 30.71% report rarer contact. The share reporting no contact is small (4.56%), which limits the plausibility of generalised social segregation and instead points to a pattern of social integration that is compatible with the maintenance of intra-community networks while remaining open to inter-ethnic relations.

Associational participation captures a more institutionalised form of social integration, as it entails membership in stable collective settings, regular interaction, and access to resources such as information, support, and socialisation. The types of organisations in which respondents engage can also be interpreted as expressions of migrants' social capital, through which the community strengthens its internal cohesion and extends its connections within the host society.

Figure 12: Membership in organisations among Romanian respondents

(Source: author's own preparations based on the author's survey)

The distribution indicates a high level of associational participation: 79.7% of respondents report being members of an organisation, while 20.3% indicate that they do not belong to any association. The dominant form of association is religion and the church (65.1%), followed at some distance by education (5.4%), health and social organisations (3.7%), and sport (2.5%). The categories of culture (0.4%), politics (0.8%), and charitable organisations (1.2%) account for small shares. The predominance of religious organisations suggests their role as community infrastructure through functions of support and socialisation, while the presence of educational and social associations points to a diversification of participation and the potential for integration through frequent interactions beyond informal networks.

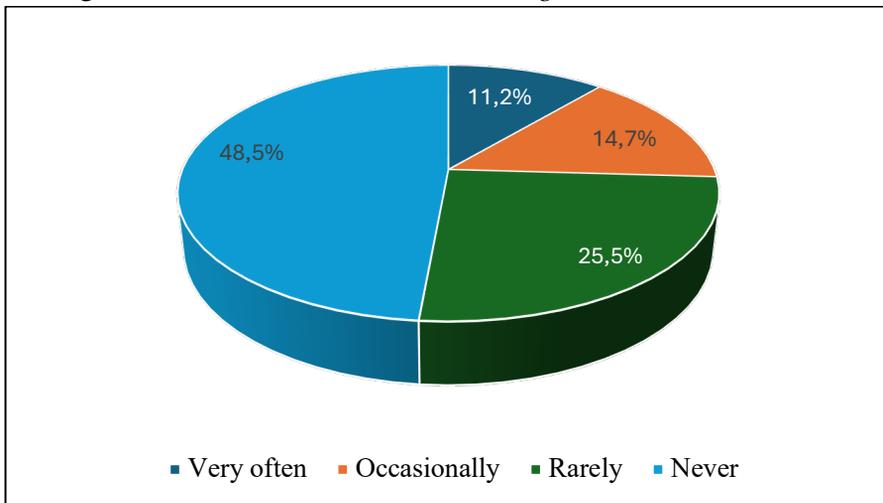
Overall, the selected indicators outline a robust pattern of social-educational integration, characterised by high levels of German language skills, the predominant use of German in professional contexts, the maintenance of Romanian within the family, and frequent bilingual practices among friends. At the relational level, the frequency of contact with people of other nationalities indicates openness towards mixed social networks, while associational participation, particularly through religious and educational organisations, suggests the presence of community social capital that can support stabilisation and the continuity of integration. At the same time, the differences observed relative to Statistik Austria benchmarks, especially about the use of German within the family and in friendship circles, point to community heterogeneity and to the fact that linguistic and social integration is configured differently depending on migration networks and living contexts.

7. Social-Cultural Integration and belonging

Social-cultural integration captures the subjective dimension of integration, namely the extent to which community members feel accepted, negotiate their identity between the society of origin and the host society, and settle in Austria over the long term. Unlike structural integration, this dimension depends more strongly on everyday interactions, social recognition, and the adoption of practices and values associated with the host society. From the perspective of the theoretical framework employed, the findings can be interpreted through the lens of transnationalism as an expression of multiple belonging, and through a constructivist perspective on identity, which conceptualises belonging as a dynamic process of negotiation shaped by experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

Perceived discrimination constitutes a central indicator of affective integration. Even under conditions of favourable economic incorporation, experiences of discrimination can erode social trust, constrain inter-ethnic relations, and indirectly influence the sense of belonging. In this respect, measuring perceived discrimination is relevant for establishing whether integration is limited to the structural functioning of socio-economic mechanisms or is accompanied by social acceptance.

Figure 13: *Perceived discrimination among Romanians in Austria*



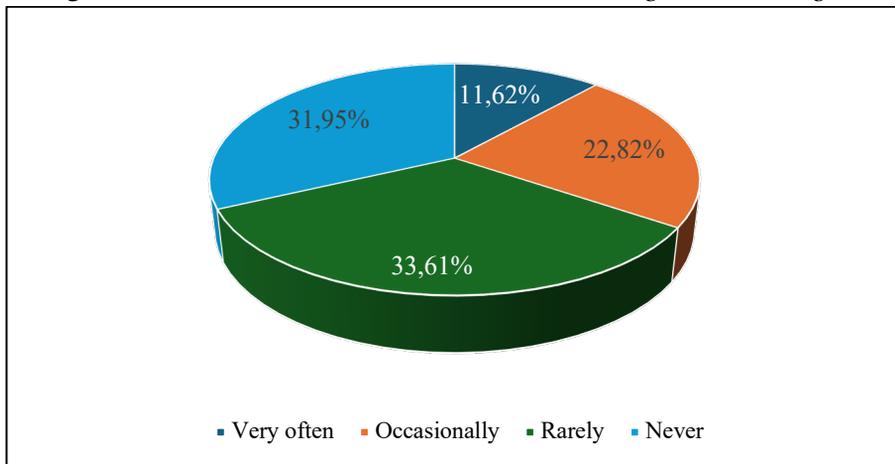
(Source: author's own preparations based on Statistik Austria, 2023: 101)

Interpretation of the data indicates that most respondents of Romanian origin report not experiencing discrimination at all or only very rarely, suggesting a relatively favourable social environment. Nevertheless, there is a segment that reports frequent experiences, with 11.2% stating that they felt discriminated against “very often”. Although numerically small, this group is sociologically significant, as repeated exposure to such situations

can substantially affect trust in institutions and may encourage an orientation towards predominantly intra-community relations.

To assess whether this tendency is also reflected in the community-based data, a comparable indicator was included in the present survey. Here, 65.56% of respondents report that they have never or very rarely felt discriminated against, and 22.82% indicate occasional experiences. Compared with Statistik Austria, the “never/very rarely” category is lower in the present survey (65.56% versus 74%), while the “occasional” category is higher (22.82% versus 14.7%), whereas the segment reporting frequent experiences remains similar (approximately 11% in both sources). These results suggest that the two datasets converge in identifying a relatively small group exposed to recurring discrimination, while the main difference concerns the prevalence of occasional experiences. Overall, the pattern points to broadly comparable distributions, with the strongest alignment occurring at the level of frequent experiences.

Figure 14: *Perceived discrimination due to ethnic origin (own survey)*



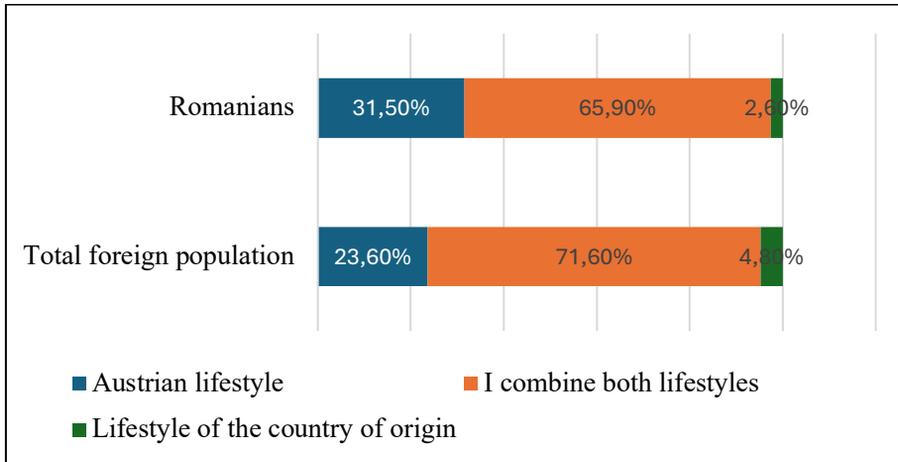
(Source: author's own preparations based on the author's survey)

These differences may reflect both sample characteristics (age structure, occupational profile, and exposure to educational and institutional settings) and the fact that self-reported discrimination is sensitive to norms, expectations, and everyday interaction contexts. Overall, the convergence between the two sources supports the interpretation that discrimination is unlikely to constitute a systemic barrier for the Romanian community.

Another indicator of socio-cultural integration is the lifestyle individuals adopt, referring to the way they combine cultural elements from their country of origin with those of the host society. In the context of mobility within the EU, cultural integration does not usually mean

completely abandoning one’s cultural background. Rather, it tends to involve a process of hybridisation, in which individuals selectively blend practices, norms, and personal preferences from both environments.

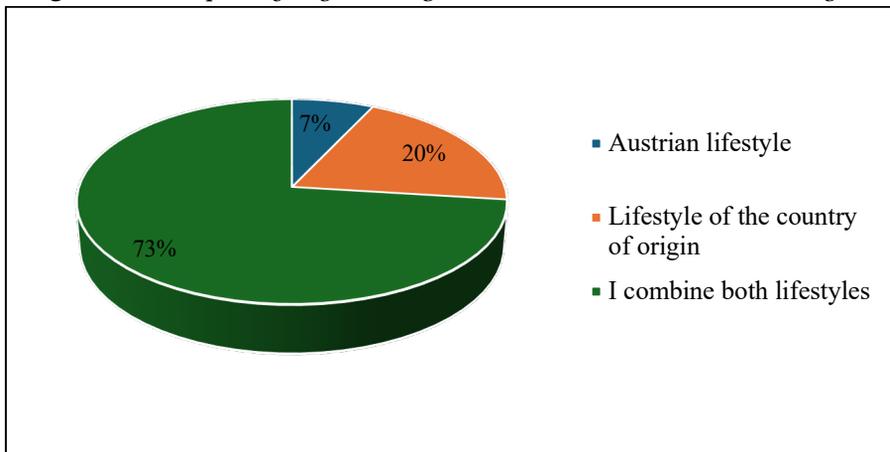
Figure 15: Adopted lifestyle among Romanians in Austria



(Source: author’s own preparations based on Statistik Austria, 2023: 105)

Institutional data indicate that the dominant pattern is the combination of the two lifestyles, while the proportion of those who report exclusively the lifestyle of the country of origin is very small (2.6%). At the same time, approximately one third report a clearer orientation towards the lifestyle of the host society, suggesting significant cultural adaptation that is compatible with the structural integration described in the preceding chapters. The present survey likewise identifies the “mixed lifestyle” as the majority pattern, albeit with a different distribution, which is informative for interpreting identity-related dynamics.

Figure 16: Adopted lifestyle among Romanians in Austria (own survey)

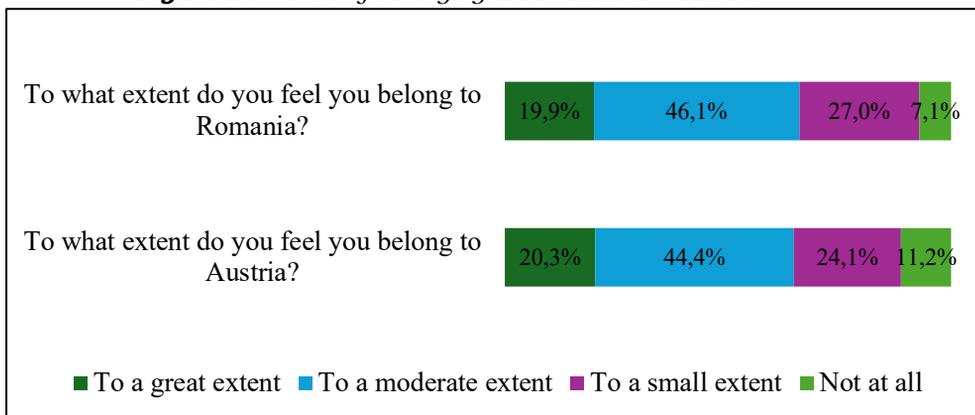


(Source: author’s own preparations based on the author’s survey)

In the sample under study, 73% report a combined lifestyle, yet the share indicating a predominantly Romanian lifestyle is higher (20%) and the share indicating a predominantly Austrian lifestyle is lower (7%) than in the Statistik Austria survey (31.5% Austrian lifestyle and 2.6% Romanian lifestyle). This difference suggests that, within the community, cultural integration tends to occur through coexistence and selective adoption rather than through a complete substitution of values. To capture generational differences more precisely, a separate analysis was conducted for the second generation (individuals born in Austria). Within this sub-sample, the mixed lifestyle remains dominant (71%), but orientation towards an Austrian lifestyle increases to 14% (compared with 7% in the overall sample), while a predominantly Romanian lifestyle declines to 14% (compared with 20%). This profile indicates a more pronounced orientation towards host-society values among those born in Austria, alongside the maintenance of dual cultural belonging. This configuration is compatible with transnationalism: origin-related practices can coexist with integration and may support community cohesion.

Belonging is the indicator that most directly captures integration at the level of identification. It does not automatically overlap with citizenship or with economic integration: migrants may enjoy rights and institutional stability without developing a strong affective identification with the host society, particularly when they maintain active networks and identity reference points in the country of origin. To capture this dimension, the present survey analysed separately the sense of belonging to Romania and to Austria, to identify possible configurations of multiple belonging and differences between identification with the country of origin and with the host society. The results indicate a structure of belonging that is compatible with a transnational interpretation. Regarding Romania, the largest category reports feeling a sense of belonging to some extent, and 19.9% consider themselves to belong fully, while 7.1% state that they do not feel any sense of belonging.

Figure 17: *Sense of belonging to Romania and Austria*

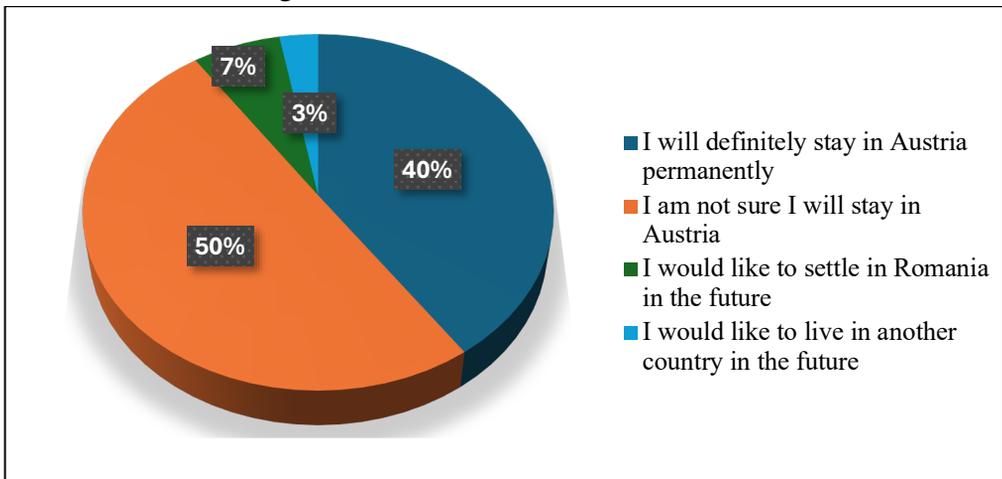


(Source: author's own preparations based on the author's survey)

Compared with the Statistik Austria survey, the share reporting strong belonging to Romania is lower in the present survey (19.9% versus 45.4%), while the proportion of weak attachment is higher. These differences may be explained by the characteristics of the sample under study, including age structure, length of residence, and educational and occupational profile, as well as by the fact that community-level and population-level measurements often capture populations with different degrees of stabilisation and institutional exposure. Regarding Austria, the present survey likewise suggests a lower intensity of belonging than that indicated by the Statistik Austria survey, where 73.5% report feeling a sense of belonging. This indicates that the identity-related dimension of integration is more variable and less uniform than structural integration, and that the distribution of responses points more towards gradual or multiple forms of belonging rather than exclusive identification with a single context.

Within a bidirectional perspective on integration, the sense of belonging and perceptions of social acceptance shape settlement plans by influencing intentions to remain, investments in integration, and the transition from residence to long-term settlement. For this reason, intentions to return or to stay constitute an indicator of stabilisation.

Figure 18: Return intentions to Romania



(Source: author's own preparations based on the author's survey)

The results indicate a clear orientation towards stabilisation in Austria: 40% report an intention to remain permanently, while only 7% express a firm intention to return to Romania. At the same time, the high share of undecided respondents suggests that, for a substantial segment of the community, settlement remains an open option and is contingent upon family trajectories, occupational opportunities, and the institutional context. In the analysis conducted, this openness is more frequent among the first

generation, whereas the second generation is more strongly oriented towards settlement, which supports the link between social integration in Austria and the consolidation of long-term stabilisation.

Overall, socio-cultural integration emerges as a favourable yet differentiated process. For most respondents, perceived discrimination is low, and the mixed lifestyle remains dominant, consistent with dual belonging. At the same time, settlement intentions indicate an orientation towards staying, alongside a substantial undecided segment that is characteristic of intra-EU mobility.

8. Conclusions

The results of the analysis indicate a generally solid level of structural integration of the Romanian community in Austria, reflected in high employment rates, occupational diversification, and positive subjective assessments of work and financial situation. At the same time, the persistence of unemployment rates above those of the native-born population suggests the presence of group-specific vulnerabilities in the labour market, consistent with mechanisms such as occupational segmentation, language barriers, or unequal recognition of qualifications.

On the social-educational dimension, the data indicate functional linguistic integration and a contextual adaptation of communication practices: German predominates in professional and institutional settings, while Romanian remains central within the family, and bilingual practices frequently emerge within friendship circles. Inter-ethnic contacts and associational participation suggest a relatively robust level of social integration, albeit with internal variation shaped by networks, language skills, and individual experiences.

At the socio-cultural level, the predominance of a mixed lifestyle, the structure of dual belonging, and the maintenance of ties with Romania support a transnational interpretation of integration: adaptation to the host society coexists with identity reference points and social practices associated with the origin context. The generational analysis shows that individuals born in Austria tend to identify more strongly with the cultural practices and norms of the host society, while still maintaining a dual sense of belonging rather than shifting to a single cultural identity. Settlement intentions suggest a predominantly stay-oriented trajectory, alongside the presence of an undecided segment that is characteristic of intra-EU mobility and of decisions shaped by family circumstances and occupational opportunities.

The findings are consistent with the theoretical framework employed and allow for an integrated reading of integration as a multidimensional process. On the economic dimension, high employment levels and

predominantly work-related motivations support the expectations of neoclassical theory, according to which intra-EU mobility is driven by differences in opportunities and the returns to human capital. The share of family migration and the role of community networks, reflected in intra-community sociability and associational participation, are compatible with network and social capital theory, which explains stabilisation and risk reduction through informal support. At the same time, the predominance of a mixed lifestyle, remittances, bilingualism, and dual belonging support a transnational perspective in which structural integration can coexist with active ties to the society of origin. The generational differences observed, particularly the stronger orientation towards host-society values among those born in Austria, are consistent with a constructivist approach that treats identity as an outcome of socialisation and of experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

In terms of its contribution, the article combines official statistical indicators with primary data collected within the community and explicitly distinguishes between structural integration and transnational belonging, while also highlighting intergenerational differences that are relevant to the dynamics of settlement. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations, in particular the non-probabilistic nature of the sample, the potential effects of self-selection, and the sensitivity of responses to subjective assessments. Future research could strengthen these conclusions through probabilistic sampling, longitudinal analyses, and systematic comparisons with other intra-EU communities, in order to identify more precisely the institutional and social mechanisms of integration.

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The level of integration of the Gagauz community from the Republic of Moldova. Public Perceptions and External Influences

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Abstract

The Gagauz community is one of the most significant expressions of ethnocultural diversity in the Republic of Moldova, benefiting from a special status of autonomy. The level of integration of this community is shaped by the interaction between its cultural identity, linguistic particularities, collective perceptions of the Moldovan state, and external influences. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the level of integration of the Gagauz community from the Republic of Moldova by referring to the official documents regulating the status of this community and to public perceptions of the various dimensions of societal integration. Methodologically, the research is based on an integrated qualitative approach that combines documentary analysis, interpretation of public discourse, and assessment of collective perceptions.

The analysis of external influences aims to identify the mechanisms through which foreign actors, especially Russia and Turkey, exert an impact on the Gagauz community. The primary identity of the residents of ATU Gagauzia is uncertain, three primary identities are taking shape at the same time - civic, regional and local community, none of which is dominant. Despite a fragmented identity and the lack of a dominant civic identity, civic duties are mostly accepted, however, the obligation to know the state language by the residents of ATU Gagauzia is a less accepted civic duty.

Keywords

Republic of Moldova, integration, ethnicity, EU, ATU Gagauzia

1. Introduction and methodology

Facing a complex international context characterized by external pressures, the Republic of Moldova, as a candidate country for European Union membership, is undergoing a continuous process of political, economic, and institutional reforms aimed at aligning domestic standards

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with European ones (Brie, 2025; Brie, 2017b). At the same time, the Russian Federation's strategic influence in the post-Soviet region continues to be a crucial factor in ensuring domestic security and stability. This duality requires the development of a balanced foreign policy that reconciles European commitments with the geopolitical and economic realities imposed by Russia's proximity and influence, given the hybrid war at the borders.

Moldova's efforts towards European integration, while maintaining its historical and cultural ties with Russia, place the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia in an increasingly precarious situation, thus acquiring particular strategic importance. Gagauzia, as an autonomous region with a distinct ethnic and cultural identity, is a relevant vector of Moldova's internal dynamics, influencing both social cohesion and political stability. The level of community integration, public perceptions, and external ties, especially historical and economic ones with the Russian Federation, are factors that can shape the process of state consolidation and its European orientation. Thus, the analysis of the autonomy of Gagauzia in the context of external pressures and the internal politics of the Republic of Moldova is justified by its direct relevance to national security, social cohesion, and the country's ability to navigate effectively in a multipolar international environment.

The Gagauz community is one of the most significant expressions of ethnocultural diversity in the Republic of Moldova, benefiting from a special status of autonomy, which gives it both political visibility and a decisive role in the dynamics of relations between state and regional authorities. The level of integration of this community is shaped by the interaction between its cultural identity, linguistic particularities, collective perceptions of the Moldovan state, and external influences that shape the social and political behaviors of its members. In a context marked by prolonged political transitions, internal polarization, and geopolitical pressures, ATU Gagauzia is emerging as a space that reflects tensions between traditionally pro-Russian orientations and those oriented toward other external centers of influence, particularly Turkey.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the level of integration of the Gagauz community from the Republic of Moldova by referring to the official documents regulating the status of this community and to public perceptions of the various dimensions of societal integration. Our *specific objectives* are: a. to analyze the balance that defines the existence of ATU Gagauzia, located at the intersection between the European aspirations of the Republic of Moldova and its cultural relations with Turkey; b. to analyze the complex dynamics of the perceptions of the Gagauzian population and authorities regarding the region's position within the Moldovan state; c. to

analyze the level of integration of the Gagauz community in the Moldovan society.

In relation to these objectives, we have also established the *levels of analysis* for this research:

1. The level of analysis of the institutional and regulatory framework of the status of ATU Gagauzia, as well as political dynamics. Thus, this research highlights the challenges of regional autonomy, minority rights, and how international political processes influence local realities.

2. The analysis of the level of integration of the Gagauz community is essential for understanding societal cohesion in the Republic of Moldova, given that collective perceptions and external influences can strengthen or weaken the links between the region and state authorities. From an identity perspective, the Gagauz community is defined by a combination of ethnic, linguistic, and religious characteristics that give it distinct visibility within the ethnic multiculturalism of the Republic of Moldova. These features determine both how community members perceive the state and how they relate to state values and institutions.

3. Analysis of external factors and influences that play a decisive role in shaping public perceptions, geopolitical orientations, and local political decisions, thus influencing the community's level of integration. The Russian Federation exerts a strong influence through cultural, political, and media channels, maintaining historical and linguistic ties with the Gagauz population, while Turkey intervenes mainly through cultural, educational, and economic programs, strengthening the ethnic and cultural dimension of community identity.

Understanding the level of integration of ATU Gagauzia requires a *multidimensional approach* that correlates the analysis of public perceptions with the assessment of the impact of external influences and the examination of the internal socio-political context. This approach allows for the identification of mechanisms through which the community's identity interacts with the authorities in Chişinău, as well as how these mechanisms can generate both cohesion and distancing from the central authorities. It is important to note that the level of integration is not a static indicator, but a dynamic one, continuously influenced by political, economic, and social developments in the Republic of Moldova, community perceptions, and interactions with external actors.

Methodologically, the research is based on an integrated qualitative approach that combines documentary analysis, interpretation of public discourse, and assessment of collective perceptions. Documentary analysis involves examining the literature, institutional reports, legislative

documents, and sociological studies to build the institutional and historical framework necessary for understanding the integration processes and relations between the authorities in Chisinau and Comrat. At the same time, the analysis of public discourse provides insights into how community leaders, local authorities, and regional media construct and convey messages about identity, geopolitical orientation, and the relationship with the state, highlighting the mechanisms through which collective perceptions are formed and propagated.

Public perceptions are assessed by interpreting data from opinion polls, social barometers, and sociological studies, which allow us to capture community members' attitudes toward central authorities, trust in public institutions, and willingness to participate in civic life. At the same time, the analysis of external influences aims to identify the mechanisms through which foreign actors, especially Russia and Turkey, exert an impact on the Gagauz community, including through the media, cultural and educational programs, economic relations, and political ties. This methodological approach allows us to capture the interaction between public perceptions and external influences, providing a comprehensive picture of the factors that determine the community's level of integration.

Through this *integrated approach*, the study offers a coherent and contextualized perspective on how public perceptions and external influences interact with the process of integration into Moldovan society (see contextually for more details, including methodological and conceptual aspects: Brie, Costea, and Toderaş, 2025; Brie, 2025). The analysis combines historical, socio-political, and cultural perspectives to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon and to emphasize the significant role that both internal and external factors play in strengthening or diminishing the social cohesion and identity of the Gagauz community.

2. Literature review

The analysis of the level of integration of the Gagauz community in the Republic of Moldova is addressed in the specialized literature within the broader framework of studies on identity, societal security, and the relationship between the state and ethno-cultural minorities. Authors analyzing this area emphasize the distinct character of the Gagauz community in the post-Soviet context, determined by the combination of territorial autonomy, a pronounced ethno-linguistic identity, and geopolitical orientations that often diverge from those of the majority population of the state.

The integration of minority communities is conceptualized in the literature on societal security both from the perspective of social cohesion

and from that of the state's ability to manage identity pluralism without generating insecurity or polarization. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, this issue is accentuated by persistent identity fragmentation and the existence of regions with special status, of which ATU Gagauzia is a relevant example (Brie, 2016).

In the Republic of Moldova, as in other countries of the former Soviet Union, the post-communist period has been marked by a process of national-ethnic and national-civic identity construction, which has encountered resistance shaped by distinct identity-based particularities (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 159). This resistance has been expressed in various identity cleavages, which we have called identity frontiers (Brie and Horga, 2014: 202-216), as well as tensions or even identity conflicts. These may range from ordinary differences of opinion within society, including civil society, to more profound identity-based conflicts—whether inter-ethnic, inter-religious, or between distinct linguistic communities. The role of civil society (Brie and Putină, 2023; Costea and Brie, 2025), as well as European conflict management and negotiation instruments, proved useful in this process of mediating particular identity disputes and conflicts (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 159). In this regard, important steps have been taken towards resolving identity conflicts in the Western Balkans (see Brie; Jusufi and Polgar, 2023 or Brie; Jusufi and Polgar, 2022). Despite shared traits and challenges, the former Soviet space has demonstrated distinct approaches to managing identity tensions and conflicts (Brie; Costea and Petrila, 2023; Brie, 2017a). Distinctive features include the articulation of identity-based cleavages and boundaries (Brie, 2016; Brie, 2021; Brie, 2023), the role played by civil society, the involvement of civil society in the democratization process (Putină and Brie, 2023; Poiană and Petrila, 2023) and the need to stimulate cooperation (Brie; Mărcuț and Polgar, 2022).

Gagauz identity is predominantly defined by ethnic, linguistic, and religious criteria, supported by a specific historical memory formed during the Russian imperial period and consolidated during the Soviet regime. The literature highlights that the process of identity construction of the Gagauz community took place in a tense relationship with the national identity project of the Moldovan state, often being articulated in opposition to it. This dynamic contributed to the formation and maintenance of an identity divided between the central authorities and the Gagauz autonomy (Brie, 2021).

The status of ATU Gagauzia within the Republic of Moldova is analyzed in the specialized literature through the prism of the normative framework governing relations between the central and autonomous authorities. The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova enshrines the principles of unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the state, while also allowing for

special forms of territorial autonomy. Law No. 344/1994 on the special legal status of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Gagauz-Yeri) is the main legal instrument defining the institutional framework of autonomy and the powers of regional authorities and is frequently cited in studies analyzing the relationship between the center and the periphery in the Republic of Moldova. Gagauzia, autonomous since 1994, is inhabited mainly by a community of Turkic origin, speaking a Turkic language and practicing the Christian Orthodox religion. These characteristics place it in a distinct identity space, located at the intersection of the influences of the Russian Federation, Turkey, and the European Union (Brie, 2022). The literature frequently correlates the analysis of ATU Gagauzia with the role of external actors, emphasizing their impact on identity and political discourse and on the functioning of local civil society (Nantoi et al., 2016).

The Russian Federation is identified as the main external actor exerting influence in the region through soft power instruments such as the media, economic support, identity discourse, and memory policies. These mechanisms contribute to the consolidation of a distinct political identity among the Gagauz population, characterized by a predominantly Eurosceptic attitude and a critical stance towards the integration policies promoted by the central authorities (Nantoi et al., 2016).

At the same time, Turkey exerts a different type of influence, focused mainly on the cultural and economic dimensions. Turkish support manifests itself through educational projects, academic exchanges, and investments in infrastructure, capitalizing on the linguistic and historical affinities between Turks and Gagauz. According to the studies analyzed, these policies contribute to strengthening the cultural identity of the community and maintaining transnational links, without directly challenging the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, the literature highlights the ambivalent nature of this influence, as it can accentuate the perception of distinct autonomy from the central authorities (Komm, Terzi, and Zamejc 2021).

The role of civil society in Gagauzia has been discussed critically in literature. Although civil society organizations are considered, in theory, to be essential actors in integration and interethnic dialogue, numerous studies indicate that they are underdeveloped, dependent on external funding, and, in certain contexts, vulnerable to political instrumentalization. As a result, local civil society often reflects existing regional identity and geopolitical divisions, limiting its ability to function as a mediator between Gagauz autonomy and central authorities (Brie and Putină, 2023).

Public perceptions of the level of integration of the Gagauz community indicate structural ambivalence. Sociological data provided by the Institute

for Public Policy reveal a low level of mutual trust between the majority population and the Gagauz community, influenced by language barriers, divergent geopolitical orientations, and competing narratives regarding state identity (IPP, 2019; IPP, 2021; IPP, 2023). In public discourse, Gagauzia is perceived either as a vulnerability for state security or as an example of institutional management of ethnic diversity, this polarization reflecting the lack of societal consensus on the role of autonomy in the architecture of the Moldovan state.

From an institutional perspective, Gagauz autonomy is described as a political compromise that helped prevent the escalation of conflict in the 1990s, but which was not followed by a coherent and sustainable long-term integration strategy (Marzac, Sandu, 2021). The absence of consistent public inclusion policies, together with the political use of identity, has led to the perpetuation of a limited, predominantly functional form of integration, without deep societal integration (Brie, 2021).

Recent literature emphasizes that the level of integration of the Gagauz community is decisively influenced by public perceptions of the state, national identity, and the geopolitical orientation of the Republic of Moldova. Integration is often perceived not as a two-way process based on recognition and participation, but as pressure to assimilate or as a potential threat to local identity. These perceptions are amplified by internal and external political actors, contributing to the maintenance of societal fragmentation.

3. The Gagauz community: identity, history, administrative and political organization

ATU Gagauzia is an area of convergence between the ethno-confessional particularities of the Turkic population and the dynamics of regional power relations. Its position at the intersection of the spheres of influence of the European Union and the Russian Federation amplifies the socio-political complexity of this autonomous territory (Goreainov and Brie, 2018). Inhabited by the Gagauz population, a Turkic-speaking and Orthodox Christian minority, ATU Gagauzia is a space where distinct cultural identity, political autonomy, and external pressures intersect.

The Republic of Moldova's drive towards European integration, while maintaining its historical and cultural ties with Russia, places Gagauzia in an increasingly fragile situation. The autonomy granted in 1994 to respond to its distinct ethnic and cultural identity has turned the region into a point of contention in the Moldovan political landscape. Gagauzia's orientation towards Russia – particularly evident in economic partnerships – often conflicts with Moldova's European aspirations, intensifying debates on the limits of autonomy in a unitary state.

3.1. Overview of ATU Gagauzia

Located in the south of the Republic of Moldova, ATU Gagauzia covers an area of approximately 1,832 square kilometers. Its landscape is largely rural, with agriculture forming the backbone of its economy (Bulut, 2016: 60-71). The geographical location of ATU Gagauzia in the immediate vicinity of Ukraine facilitates complex interactions at the regional level. At the same time, its location near the Moldovan-Romanian border connects the autonomy to the dynamics of the European space. These strategic proximities reinforce Gagauzia's role as a node of geopolitical and commercial interest in southeastern Europe.

Estimates of the population of ATU Gagauzia vary between 124,000 and nearly 173,000, depending on the source. According to TURKSOY, the International Organization of Turkic Culture, Gagauzia has a population of 172,500 (TURKSOY, 2025). However, significant emigration, driven by economic and social factors, is believed to have reduced this number, with current estimates suggesting a population closer to 100,000. This demographic shift poses challenges for the preservation of the region's cultural and linguistic identity.

The ethno-linguistic configuration of Gagauz autonomy reveals an intersection between linguistic pragmatism and identity preservation. The predominance of Russian in public spaces is complemented by policies aimed at revitalizing the Gagauz dialect and linguistic integration into the national system through the study of Romanian. However, Eastern Orthodox Christianity remains the central pillar of social unity. Eastern Orthodox Christianity is central to the identity of ATU Gagauzia, influencing traditions and community cohesion. The institution of the church and the calendar of religious holidays act as factors of cohesion, underpinning the moral values and social structure of the community.

ATU Gagauzia enjoys a certain degree of autonomy within the Republic of Moldova, being governed by the People's Assembly and an executive leader known as the Bashkan (Gagauzia Dialogue, 2025). This framework gives the region authority over key areas such as education, culture, and local governance, while maintaining its integration into the Moldovan state. This balance has underscored its efforts to manage internal affairs while defining its role in the broader national context. However, in recent years, Gagauz politicians have claimed that this autonomy is seriously threatened by the government in Chisinau. The economic profile of Gagauz people sought to assert their cultural and political identity in the context of Moldova's post-Soviet transition. The potential for separatist movements prompted the authorities in Chisinau to negotiate a framework that would integrate ATU Gagauzia while respecting its specific characteristics. The 1994 autonomy agreement,

which established the self-government of ATU Gagauzia within the Republic of Moldova, was not only an internal achievement, but also the result of Turkey's influence, led by then-President Süleyman Demirel (Socor, 2013). Turkey's involvement in this process was deeply rooted in historical and cultural ties, as the Gagauz people, a Turkic ethnic group, share linguistic and cultural ties with the Turkish nation.

The aspirations for independence of the region's population generated an imminent risk of conflict, in which context Turkey intervened diplomatically, advocating for a peaceful resolution. Ankara's objective was to preserve the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, conditioned, however, on the official recognition of the distinct rights and identity of the Gagauz ethnic group. The resulting legal framework established ATU Gagauzia, granting the authorities in Comrat powers to manage internal affairs, with a focus on education, culture, and administration. A central element of this agreement was the self-determination clause, which allows for the separation of the region in the event of Moldova's loss of independence — a strategic provision designed to alleviate local concerns about a potential unification with Romania.

Under the auspices of President Süleyman Demirel, Turkey acted as a mediator, promoting dialogue and compromise as fundamental mechanisms for resolving the crisis. Turkey's diplomatic engagement with both Chisinau and Comrat facilitated the climate of trust necessary to harmonize the divergent positions of the central government and the leaders of the autonomy, culminating in the signing of the historic agreement. Beyond diplomacy, Turkey has provided significant cultural and educational support to the Gagauz Autonomous Territorial Unit, strengthening its unique identity within the autonomous region. Scholarships, cultural exchange programs, and economic aid have become essential tools in strengthening the bond between Turkey and the Gagauz people. These initiatives have contributed to the preservation of the region's cultural heritage, while promoting development and integration into the broader structure of the Republic of Moldova. This is why the Gagauz people still refer to Süleyman Demirel as their "father" (Akin, 2022).

Throughout its existence, ATU Gagauzia has consolidated its autonomous status by using legal levers to preserve its cultural and linguistic heritage while maintaining a distinct political identity. The self-government structure is based on two key institutions: the People's Assembly (the legislative body) and the Bashkan (the executive leader).

The implementation of autonomy has not been without friction. Tensions with the central authorities in Chisinau are recurrent,

manifesting themselves primarily in disputes over the allocation of economic resources, political representation, and differences in foreign policy orientation. A telling example is the persistent inclination of ATU Gagauzia towards the Russian Federation, especially in the commercial and cultural spheres, which contrasts sharply with the pro-European strategic vector of the Republic of Moldova. Despite these challenges, the autonomous framework has functioned as an effective *conflict management* mechanism, preventing disputes from escalating into violent conflicts observed in other post-Soviet spaces. The political evolution of the region illustrates the precarious balance between exercising local self-government within a unitary state and managing external geopolitical pressures. Currently, ATU Gagauzia is a relevant case study in the analysis of mechanisms for managing ethnic and cultural diversity through negotiated autonomy.

3.2. The role of the ATU Gagauzia in the context of Moldova's accession to the EU

Gagauzia is a strategic segment in the equation of the geopolitical competition between the Russian Federation and the European Union. Due to economic interdependencies and deep cultural affinities with Russia, the region is a key point in Moscow's strategy to limit the expansion of Western influence in Eastern Europe. In this context, the Russian Federation is implementing various *soft power* mechanisms—including asymmetric trade facilities, cultural policies, and logistical support for local political elites—with the aim of preserving its regional hegemony and questioning the viability of Moldova's strategic pro-European path.

Evghenia Guțul's visit to Moscow in March 2024 clearly illustrated this perspective. She stated: "I told Putin about the illegal actions of the Moldovan authorities, who are taking revenge on us for our civic positions and for defending our national interests" (Tanas, 2024).

This alignment with Russia frequently generates conflicts between Gagauzia and the Moldovan government, especially in the context of Chisinau seeking closer relations with the EU. Gagauzia's consistent support for Russian-led initiatives, such as favoring the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) over European integration, complicates Moldova's foreign policy and highlights the broader geopolitical competition in the region. As a culturally distinct autonomous entity, Gagauzia exemplifies the challenges of balancing historical affiliations with Russia and aspirations for European integration. Its geopolitical importance lies in its potential to influence the direction of Moldova, making it a critical factor in the broader struggle for influence in the post-Soviet space.

In ATU Gagauzia, certain policies promoted at the central level are perceived, especially in the discourse of regional leaders, as having potential implications for the degree of autonomy, through their emphasis on strengthening central government, limiting external influence, and economic reorientation. Although there are no official statements explicitly targeting the restriction of Gagauz autonomy, differences in perception persist between the authorities in Comrat and those in Chisinau. Referendums held in the region indicate a distinct orientation of a significant part of local public opinion, while the positions expressed by the central leadership reflect other strategic priorities.

The evolution of the situation in the ATU Gagauzia is also complicated, especially at the political and identity levels (in this section we use some parts of Brie, 2025). The Gagauz community has always been a border community. This reality is precisely due to the positioning, often controversial, between the Bulgarian, Turkish and more recently Russian identity of the members of this community. Apart from their controversial origin, their identity carries significant nuances along some historical stages that marked their existence. More and more, this community transformed its identity towards what today is a Russophile community, systematically supported by Moscow. Without being very numerous (according to the 2004 census, it counted 147,500 members, of which 127,835 lived in the ATU Gagauzia), this community stands out for the importance it had in the history of Bessarabia (The National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024a). According to the 2014 census data, 134,535 inhabitants lived in the ATU Gagauzia, of which 112,387 were Gagauz (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024b).

ATU Gagauzia is perhaps the most Russophile region of the Republic of Moldova. A separatist entity in the early 1990s, ATU Gagauzia eventually accepted Chisinau's sovereignty, but claims the right to secede in the event of a union with Romania or even European integration. Moreover, the approaching to Russia, the visits made to Moscow and the pro-Russian policies of the bashkan woman Evghenia Guțul made her being included on the sanctions lists of the West. *„The USA imposed sanctions against Evghenia Guțul for involvement in hybrid actions against the state of the Republic of Moldova and its citizens, actions financed with money from criminal sources. The decision comes as a result of effective collaboration with our external partners and we will continue to take decisive measures to counter corruption and threats to national security”*, Dorin Recean, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova wrote in June 2024. Later on, on October 9th, 2024, the European Union also included in the list of those sanctioned for attempts to destabilize the

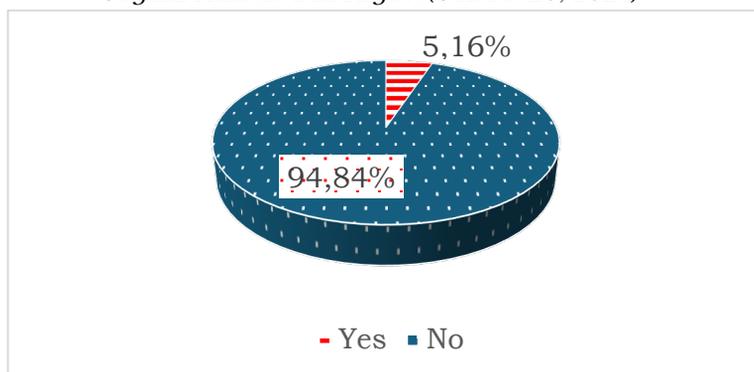
Republic of Moldova five more people, among whom Evghenia Guțul is, the current bashkan of ATU Gagauzia, affiliated with the fugitive named Ilan Șor (HotNews.ro, 2024).

The perception of public opinion in ATU Gagauzia regarding the EU and the European integration of the Republic of Moldova was captured by the Public Policy Institute, which has been conducting opinion polls focused on the residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district since 2011. The most recent one was published in 2022 and includes analyzes of some data collected in September-October 2021 (thus before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and during the period when Irina Vlah was still the bashkan of ATU Gagauzia). We mention the fact that on July 19, 2023, the new Governor (*Bashkan*) is Evghenia Guțul, *whose positions proved to be even more radical regarding the rapprochement with the Russian Federation and the opposition to the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova with the EU. However, the public perception towards EU rapprochement has improved in the post-2015 period in this region as well. In 2021, 17.6% would vote for joining the European Union (compared to only 3.6% in 2015) and 58% against joining (compared to 80% in 2015). If they were to choose between joining the European Union and joining the Eurasian Economic Union, then 44.1% would vote for joining the Eurasian Economic Union (86.9% in 2015) and 19% for joining the European Union (2.6 % in 2015) (IPP, 2021, p. 34).*

The political messages were very radicalized in favor of a pro-Russian position in the context of the war in Ukraine, especially after the election of the new bashkan Evghenia Guțul (July 2023). The political evolution and the messages of the leaders of ATU Gagauzia in 2024 seem to lead to a scenario reminiscent of the situation in Transnistrian region in the early '90s. There is a visible attempt to link the region economically and politically to Russia. The agreement signed between Bashkan Guțul and Promsvyazbank, along with adherence to the Russian alternative financial infrastructure to SWIFT, called „Mir”, indicates an even deeper anchorage in the Russian sphere of influence. „These actions not only strengthen financial and economic ties, but create a structural dependency that can be difficult to reverse in the medium and long term. This, of course, if it materialized. „Mir” cards would rather be used to pay SHOR protesters and voters, to vote against the referendum on EU” accession, held on October 20th, 2024 (Pleșca, 2024).

During the referendum on accession to the European Union, only 5.16% of the citizens of the ATU Gagauzia answered yes. Thus, almost 95% of the Gagauzians present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

Figure 1: Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Gagauz Autonomous Region (October 20, 2024)



(Source: own drawing with information from the Central Electoral Commission, 2024)

In the case of this region, inhabited mainly by Gagauz, 57,847 people voted in this referendum, and only 2,985 were in favor of amending the Constitution in order to join the EU, while 54,862 people voted against. We can conclude that the Gagauz people almost completely reject the idea of joining the EU, while at the same time preferring a geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation (Brie, 2025).

3.3. The autonomy of ATU Gagauzia in the geopolitical context. External relations and influences

From a geographical and political point of view, ATU Gagauzia is a key point in the regional geopolitical context. Moldova's steady progress towards European integration places it firmly under the influence of the European Union, while Gagauzia's deep cultural and economic ties with Russia generate internal conflict. This duality reflects the post-Soviet region's ongoing "struggle" for identity, balance, and progress in the context of competing forces from the East and West.

Within the state architecture of the Republic of Moldova, the autonomous status of Gagauzia fulfills a dual function: it acts as a protective mechanism for the preservation of Turkic ethno-cultural identity and, at the same time, constitutes a constraint on the authority of the unitary state. The vector of European integration assumed by Chisinau frequently collides with the geopolitical orientations of the autonomous region, which shows a predilection for strengthening relations with the Russian Federation. The results of local elections and referendums consistently confirm broad support for pro-Russian policies, a phenomenon determined by economic dependence on Eastern markets and historical cultural affinity. This asymmetry of views highlights the difficulty of developing a coherent national strategy capable of harmonizing the state's European ambitions with the specific priorities of Gagauz autonomy. From Moscow's perspective,

Gagauzia is a strategic vector of influence, used to counterbalance the increasingly active presence of Western actors in the Republic of Moldova. Through soft power instruments—such as economic incentives, cultural programs, and direct political support—the Russian Federation seeks to strengthen the region's loyalty. Consequently, ATU Gagauzia transcends its strictly cultural significance, becoming a focal point of geopolitical competition between East and West in a regional context marked by strategic reconfigurations (Brie, Costea, and Toderaş, 2025).

It is therefore visible the preference of the population of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District for integration into the Eurasian Economic Union compared to the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU. And the vote against is relevant to be analyzed, 58.4% would vote against joining the European Union (IPP, 2021: 34).

A. The relationship between ATU Gagauzia and the Russian Federation

Rising tensions between the Republic of Moldova, ATU Gagauzia, and the Shor Party have placed the region at the intersection of domestic governance and foreign geopolitics. Recent sanctions imposed by the Moldovan government and the EU reflect a concerted effort to counter what are perceived as threats to the sovereignty and constitutional integrity of the Republic of Moldova.

The region overwhelmingly supported closer ties with the Russian-led Customs Union, while also asserting its right to declare independence if the Republic of Moldova were to lose its sovereignty. The February 2014 referendum invited the population of ATU Gagauzia to express their position on two key options: rapprochement with Europe or strengthening relations with Russia. A third, much more controversial question concerned the possibility of Gagauzia seeking independence if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty, for example through a possible unification with Romania (Minzarari, 2014). Although declared unconstitutional by the Moldovan authorities, this referendum highlighted the distinct political determination of the Gagauzian Autonomous Territorial Unit and its commitment to reflecting the will of the population.

Another event in 2023 amplified opposition to Gagauzia from both the central government and the EU: the election of Evghenia Guţul as Bashkan. Backed by the Shor Party, her agenda was labeled pro-Russian and clashed with the central government's pro-European policies, becoming a point of political conflict. The Shor Party, led by oligarch Ilan Shor, has long been considered a destabilizing force in Moldovan politics. With a platform often described as Eurosceptic and pro-Russian, the party has gained support among the rural and pro-Russian population.

However, Guțul rejected these accusations, stating that the government's priority should be the welfare of the population and declaring that, despite promises to promote European values over the past four years, Moldova has experienced both economic and social decline. According to her, relations with strategic partners, such as the Russian Federation and other post-Soviet states, have deteriorated. She stressed that, according to the Constitution, the Republic of Moldova is a neutral and sovereign state, and this neutrality should be maintained without taking any geopolitical positions. In her opinion, the country's president is currently acting in line with Western guidelines (Karahindiba, 2024). According to Guțul, the agricultural economy of ATU Gagauzia has suffered significant losses, mainly due to the loss of access to the Russian market, which traditionally absorbed its abundant production of fruit, vegetables, and wine. She believes that the Republic of Moldova and ATU Gagauzia should cooperate and maintain friendly relations with all states, for the benefit of their citizens. In June 2023, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova declared the Shor Party unconstitutional, citing illegal financing and attempts to destabilize the constitutional order. The party was dissolved, causing a severe blow to its political activity in the Republic of Moldova (BBC, 2023). The Gagauz ethnic population maintains intrinsic socio-cultural ties with the Russian Federation, a phenomenon reflected in the prevalence of the Russian language in everyday interactions. This cultural convergence is particularly reflected in media consumption choices and in the structures of the local education system, which tend to gravitate towards Russian norms and standards, distancing themselves from Moldovan or European national paradigms.

From a macroeconomic perspective, ATU Gagauzia has a structural dependence on the Russian Federation, both in terms of trade and financial assistance. Exports of value-added agri-food products, such as wine and oilseeds, are primarily directed towards Russian markets. Furthermore, remittances from migrant workers in the Russian Federation are an essential component of regional disposable income, reinforcing economic interdependence. A key factor in this equation is the supply of natural gas, a vital energy resource whose direct supply is becoming a strategically important tool in the relationship between Moscow and the autonomous region.

In April 2024, the Bashkan of the Gagauz autonomy in the Republic of Moldova, Evghenia Guțul, who met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, said: "First, we asked the Russian leadership to provide facilities to our Gagauz exporters for the delivery of goods to Russia. Secondly, to provide the residents of our autonomy with a gas discount. Thirdly, to grant us access to Russia's payment infrastructure" (TASS, 2024). After the

meeting, a cooperation agreement in the banking and financial sector was signed between Russia and ATU Gagauzia with Promsvyazbank (PSB), which allowed 25,000 people to use the Russian MIR payment system.

The coercive measures imposed by the central authorities in Chisinau and the European Union escalated, resulting in the adoption of sanctions regimes. In October 2024, the EU Council implemented restrictive measures against high-ranking officials in the Comrat administration, including Governor (Bashkan) Evghenia Guțul. These decisions were based on accusations of inciting separatism and actions aimed at destabilizing the constitutional order of the Republic of Moldova. The sanctions imposed restrict freedom of movement within the EU and freeze financial assets. At the same time, a group of sixteen regional officials, including the governor (Bashkan), were subject to similar restrictions on access to economic resources and funds. This diplomatic and economic pressure has led to a strategic reorientation, propelling the ATU Gagauzia towards closer cooperation with the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey. At the same time, there has been a severe contraction in the volume of regional exports to the Russian market, a phenomenon caused by a convergence of factors: intensified geopolitical tensions, the application of international sanctions, and the proliferation of tariff and administrative trade barriers.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict led to extensive Western sanctions against Russia, disrupting trade flows and diminishing Russia's ability to engage economically. Moldova's increased alignment with EU policies under the EU Association Agreement further shifted the trade focus away from Russia (Ibrahimova, 2024). Russia has imposed import restrictions on Moldovan products, including those from ATU Gagauzia, due to ongoing political tensions. At the same time, Russia has prioritized imports from other CIS states, marginalizing Moldovan exporters. Logistical barriers have further exacerbated the difficulties of Gagauzia, particularly in terms of its ability to export goods to Russia. The war in Ukraine has disrupted key land trade routes traditionally used by Moldova and ATU Gagauzia to access Russian markets. This disruption has increased logistical difficulties, forcing exporters to resort to less efficient and more costly routes (Kunde, 2025).

B. The relationship between ATU Gagauzia and Turkey

The relationship between Turkey and ATU Gagauzia is proof of Turkey's commitment to supporting Turkic and culturally related communities around the world. Turkey is a key player in promoting cultural preservation and economic development in ATU Gagauzia, while respecting the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova.

Through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Turkey has supported numerous cultural and educational initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting the Gagauz identity. TİKA has contributed to the establishment and maintenance of cultural institutions in ATU Gagauzia, such as the Dimitriy Kara Çöban Museum in Beşalma. Scholarships and exchange programs have also enabled Gagauz students to study in Turkey, strengthening people-to-people ties. Economic cooperation is another pillar of support. It has invested in infrastructure and development projects designed to stimulate the regional economy, including the construction and renovation of roads, schools, and medical facilities. Turkey has actively encouraged Turkish companies to invest in ATU Gagauzia with a view to creating jobs and stimulating economic growth. In November 2019, a delegation from the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) participated in the 5th International Investment Forum "Invest Gagauzia," held in Comrat, with over 400 participants, including ambassadors, diplomats, and businesspeople from Turkey. Discussions focused on the region's investment potential (The Organization of Turkic States, 2019).

In terms of foreign policy, Turkey's approach to ATU Gagauzia is one of balanced diplomacy. Firmly supporting the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, the Ankara government has acted to respect the autonomy of ATU Gagauzia and to meet its development needs. The leadership of ATU Gagauzia, including Bashkan Evghenia Guţul, has consistently emphasized the cordial nature of relations with Turkey, describing them as a partnership based on "brotherhood."

4. Analysis of public perceptions regarding the integration of Gagauz people and external influence

In the process of European integration of the Republic of Moldova, public perceptions in ATU Gagauzia are an important element for understanding internal political and social dynamics. The region has distinct identity, linguistic, and cultural characteristics that influence how the population relates to both the central authorities and the European Union. An analysis of these perceptions is necessary to understand why attitudes towards European integration differ significantly from those in other regions of the country.

This chapter analyzes the main perceptions of the Gagauz population regarding European integration and the role of external actors in shaping these opinions. It examines issues such as identity, geopolitical orientation, media influence, relations with the Russian Federation, and the level of trust in the European Union. The analysis is based on opinion poll data collected in ATU Gagauzia and highlights how external influence

contributes to maintaining a predominantly skeptical attitude towards the European project.

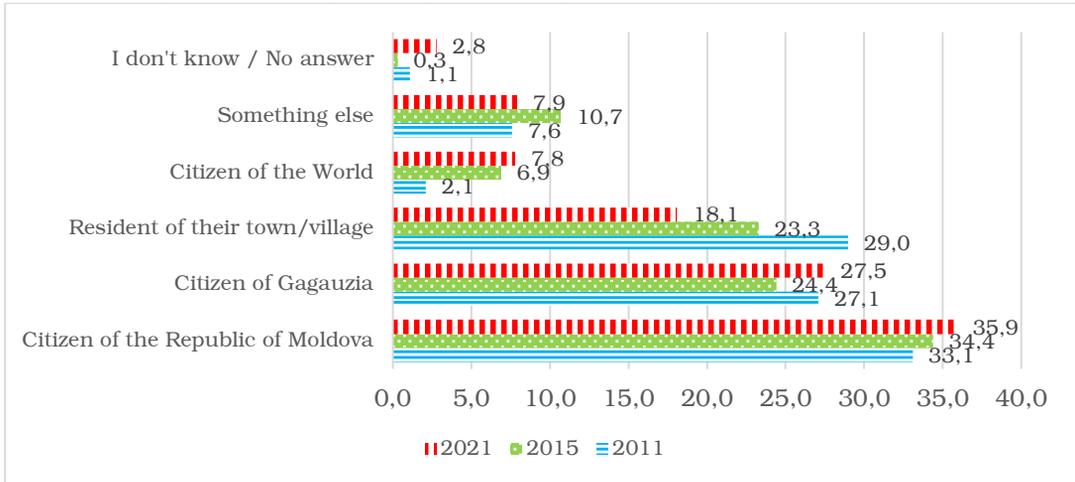
Starting from the premise that the Gagauz people have almost unanimously rejected the idea of joining the EU (expressing a preference for geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation), we propose to conduct an analysis using the database of the Institute for Public Policy (IPP), which has carried out complex surveys in ATU Gagauzia (inhabited mainly by Gagauz people) and Taraclia (a district inhabited mainly by Bulgarians and Gagauz people). The IPP has conducted three surveys on this topic (2011, 2015, and 2021).

Based on the complexity of the analysis conducted by the IPP as part of the project “Moldova between East and West: views from ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia,” we would like to analyze the options for internal and external integration, as well as their attitude towards various international partners.

According to the results (2015), 77.3% of the respondents from ATU Gagauzia and 69.7% from the Taraclia district perceive themselves as part of the society of the Republic of Moldova, and 71.4% of the respondents from both territorial formations consider themselves integrated into the society of Republic of Moldova (Nantoi et al., 2016: 16). At the same time, 64.6% of respondents consider that the Republic of Moldova is part of the Russian world, for 15.4% of respondents, Moldovan culture is closer, and for 36.1% - Russian culture (Nantoi et al., 2016: 18, 24). We find that although the vast majority of respondents identify themselves as part of the society from the Republic of Moldova, a good part considers the Republic of Moldova as part of the Russian world, almost all those questioned declared that they know the Russian language and only less than 17% know the state language. Although more than 2/3 consider interethnic relations to be friendly and peaceful, about the same percentage of respondents would prefer to live in the Eurasian Union, and 78.2% of those surveyed would prefer their children to emigrate to Russia (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 169-170).

In ATU Gagauzia, the primary identity reflects a balance between civic belonging to the Republic of Moldova and connection to the Gagauz regional identity. The latter often plays a more active and visible role in social and political life. The region’s autonomous status and local political discourse, emphasizing differences from central authorities, reinforce a sense of belonging to the regional community, making citizens more receptive to identifying with the ATU Gagauzia.

Figure 2: Primary identity in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district (%)

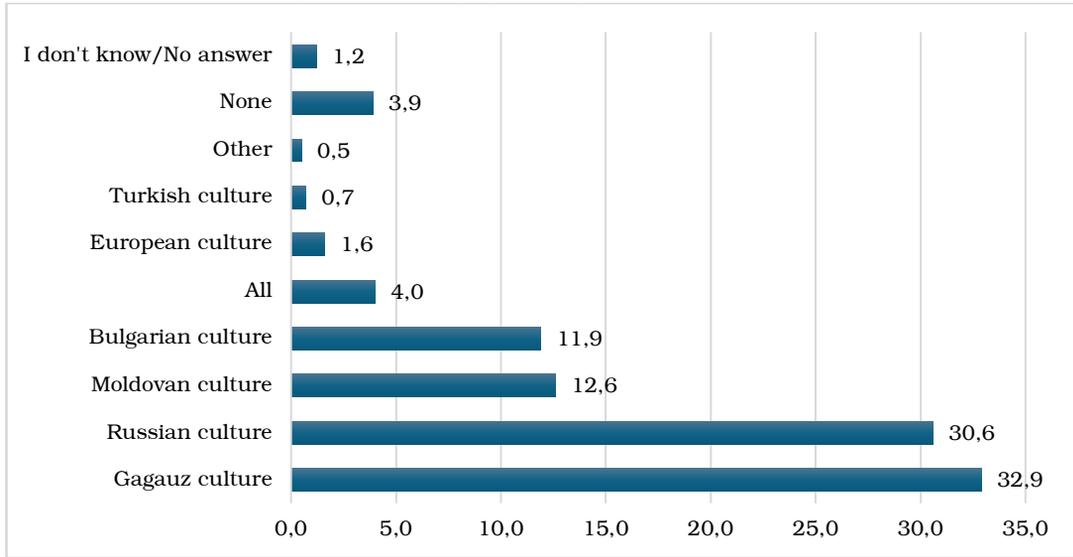


(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 9)

In 2021, 35.9% of residents identified themselves primarily as citizens of the Republic of Moldova, and 27.5% as citizens of ATU Gagauzia. This difference shows that civic belonging is formally recognized, but regional identity has a stronger impact on how people relate to their community, influenced by administrative autonomy and the messages of local leaders. Thus, regional identity becomes a clear benchmark for belonging, community solidarity, and distinct political choices, including skepticism towards European integration (IPP, 2021). Russian culture thus functions as a stable frame of reference, associated with continuity and security, while European culture appears more distant and inaccessible in the daily experiences of residents. This cultural configuration reinforces regional identity and encourages a reserved attitude towards European integration, while paving the way for the reception of political and media messages from the Russian Federation (Brie, 2025).

Cultural belonging in ATU Gagauzia reflects the tension between local values and external influences. Gagauz and Russian cultures are perceived as being similar by the population: 32.9% of respondents identify primarily with Gagauz culture, and 30.6% with Russian culture, while the connection with European culture remains weak. Affinity for Russian culture is not strictly determined by ethnic origin. Rather, it results from a long process of socialization and media coverage, which has integrated Russian values and symbols into the daily lives of its people.

Figure 3: *Belonging to the felt culture (2021)*

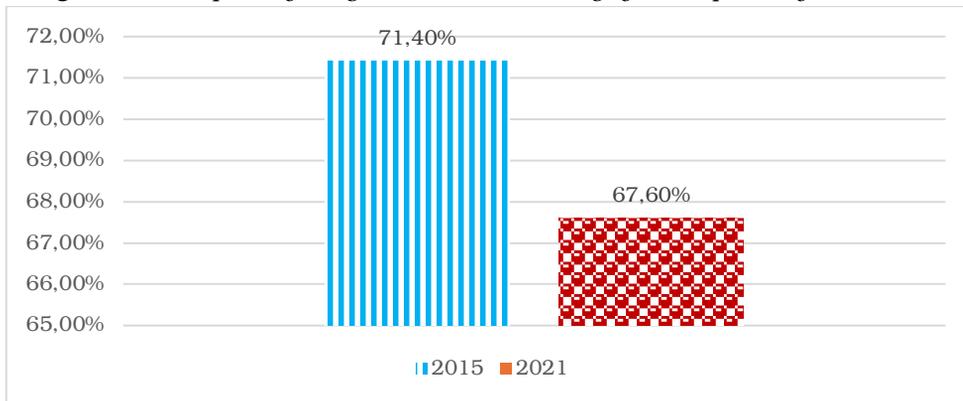


(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 10)

Attitudes toward the autonomous status of ATU Gagauzia show strong support for expanding local powers. In 2021, 56.9% of respondents believed that autonomy should be strengthened, while only 4% supported reducing it. The difference highlights a persistent distrust in the central authorities' ability to defend the region's interests.

For residents, autonomy is not just an administrative arrangement, but a mechanism for protecting local identity and political interests. In the context of external influences and strong regional political discourse, this perception can be used to challenge Moldova's European path and reaffirm the connection with local cultural values and symbols (Pleșca, 2024).

Figure 4: *Perception of integration into the society of the Republic of Moldova*

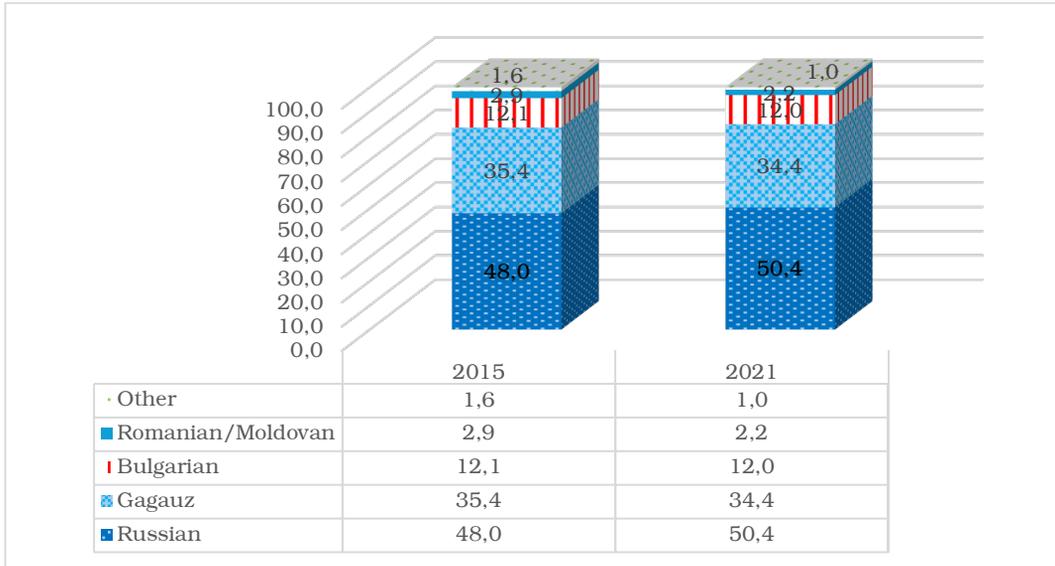


(Source: Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 12)

Linguistic practices in ATU Gagauzia are directly integrated into the dynamics of regional and cultural identity. Just as cultural belonging and autonomy emphasize the community's connection to local values and external influences, the Russian language dominates the private sphere, reinforcing these connections. In 2021, 50.4% of respondents communicated predominantly in Russian at home, while only 2.2% used Romanian/Moldovan, highlighting the symbolic distance from the state's linguistic space and emphasizing the region's cultural autonomy.

The predominance of Russian facilitates access to Russian information and culture and limits direct contact with the public discourse of the central authorities and the European Union. As a result, language becomes not only an instrument of community cohesion, but also an indirect factor of geopolitical orientation, strengthening regional identity and maintaining cultural autonomy in relation to the state and the European path (IPP, 2021).

Figure 5: Language spoken at home (%)



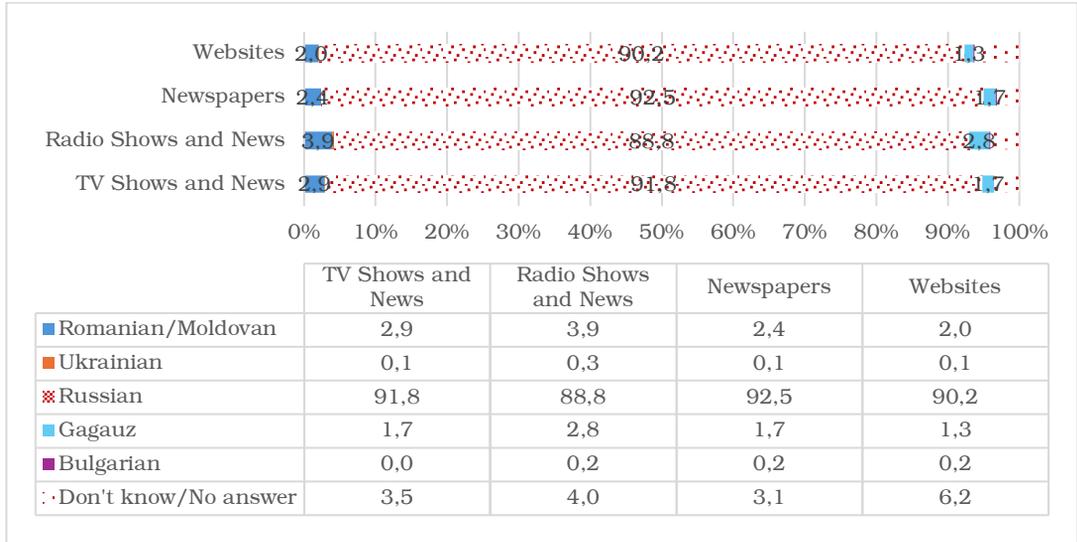
(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 13)

The predominant use of Russian in private life is also reflected in the way residents obtain information. In 2021, over 91% of respondents said they mainly access Russian-language media, while Romanian-language sources are used only marginally (IPP, 2021). Thus, the region is situated in an information space distinct from the national one, where narratives favorable to the Russian Federation become dominant.

Dependence on Russian-language media amplifies the community's informational vulnerability and contributes to maintaining Euroscepticism, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine. The lack of credible

alternatives in Russian or Gagauz limits access to pro-European perspectives and strengthens external influence on public opinion.

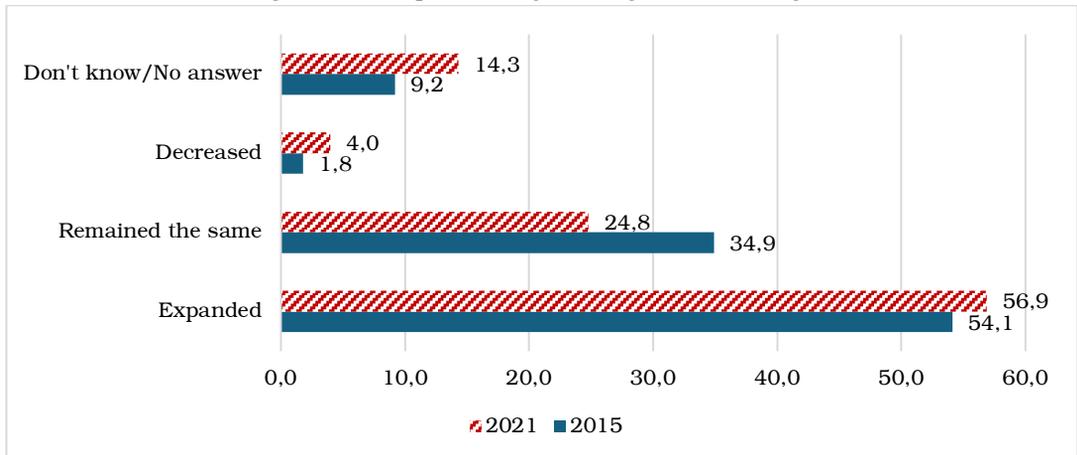
Figure 6: Language of information sources



(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 21)

In a space where Gagauz and Russian cultures predominate, the Russian language governs everyday life, and Russian-language media control the flow of information, autonomy becomes a tool through which the community retains control over its own destiny. In this way, the perception of autonomy can be used to challenge Moldova's European path and reaffirm its connection to regional values and symbols. For residents, autonomy is not just an administrative arrangement, but a mechanism for protecting local identity and political interests.

Figure 7: Competences of the Gagauz Autonomy



(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 24)

In this context, support for the autonomy of Gagauzia is easier to understand. In 2021, 56.9% of respondents believed that the powers of autonomy should be expanded, while only 4% supported their reduction. This preference reflects a structural distrust of the central authorities' ability to represent the region's interests and continues the logic of strengthening regional identity, visible in cultural affiliation, language, and media consumption.

Processing of data from the 2021 IPP survey within the project "*Moldova between East and West: Visions from Gagauzia and Taraclia*," funded by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a project of the German Marshall Fund (USA), enabled the development of a comparative analysis of data from research conducted by IPP in 2011, 2015, and 2021.

Some conclusions reached by the authors after processing the obtained data: the primary identity of the residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district is uncertain, three primary identities are taking shape at the same time - civic, regional and local community, none of which is dominant; cultural identity in the researched regions is diffuse, bidirectional, respondents feeling belonging both to the culture of their own ethnicity and to Russian culture. Despite a fragmented identity and the lack of a dominant civic identity, civic duties are mostly accepted, however, the obligation to know the state language by the residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district is a less accepted civic duty (IPP, 2021). In comparison with the surveys carried out in 2011 and 2015, the authors note the following: since the 2011 survey, the share of those who know the state language has increased. Thus, the share of those who say they speak fluent Moldovan/Romanian has doubled (from 11.6%, in the 2011 survey, to 23.4% in 2021), and the share of those who say they speak Romanian fluently has increased from 9.7% in 2011 to 16.8% in 2021; linguistic realities also determine the consumption of media products in the researched regions, dominated by media production from the Russian Federation, and the specifics of the informational space, in turn, determine the political and geopolitical perceptions in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 170).

Conclusion

ATU Gagauzia is a sensitive element in the political and institutional architecture of the Republic of Moldova, having a direct impact on social cohesion and state stability. The autonomous status has helped to avoid violent conflict, but has not led to deep societal integration of the Gagauz

community. The persistence of identity, linguistic, and geopolitical differences indicates a limited level of integration.

In this context, the relationship between the central and autonomous authorities is still defined by institutional and identity differences. These differences influence the extent to which the two levels of government cooperate. Meanwhile, the geopolitical orientations of the Gagauz community continue to diverge from those assumed at the national level. This discrepancy is reflected in the results of popular polls conducted in the region.

External factors exert a constant influence on local dynamics. The Russian Federation plays a significant role in the autonomous region's information space. At the same time, Turkey is present through cultural and economic initiatives. These influences contribute to maintaining a distinct regional profile. As a result, public integration policies have had a limited impact. Institutional dialogue between Chisinau and Comrat varies in intensity. The involvement of local civil society in integration processes remains low. The level of integration of the Gagauz community is influenced by political, cultural, and external factors.

Strengthening the relationship between Chisinau and Comrat requires functional cooperation mechanisms, respect for autonomy, and the promotion of inclusion. The integration of the Gagauz community is an essential condition for national security and the sustainability of Moldova's European path.

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Refugee Policy in Romania

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Abstract

The research explores Romanian refugee policy in the context of global displacement, European asylum governance and changing demographics; the study examines the balance of Romanian policies between humanitarian commitments with institutional capability, financial limits and long-term integration issues amid 2015–2016 European refugee crisis and contemporary arrival of Ukrainian migrants. Romania possessed a distinctive position within the broader European context as historically Romania is open to migration; balancing humanitarian responsibilities with institutional and capacity limits while aligning refugee administration with international and Europe Union (EU) standards.

Keywords

Refugee Policy; Romania; Public Perception; Asylum Governance; Integration

1. Introduction and Methodology

Globalisation, military wars, economic inequality and geopolitical instability have increased migration in recent decades but these factors also forced the governments across the globe to reconsider their refugee and asylum policies; especially after the 2015-2016 European refugee crises which put unprecedented demand on asylum systems and border controls (Kelemen and McNamara, 2021). Romania possessed a distinctive position within the broader European context as O'Brien et al. (2023) cited that historically Romania is open to migration; balancing humanitarian responsibilities with institutional and capacity limits while aligning refugee administration with international and Europe Union (EU) standards. Romania's demographic profile is changing due to a steady growth of third-country nationals (TCNs) and intra-EU migration which consequently increases the need for comprehensive integration policies for refugees; Romania accepted 1,785 asylum seekers during the European refugee crisis, reflecting its willingness to share responsibility and its capabilities (Lilla, 2019). However, Radu (2022) found that the recent arrival of nearly 140,000

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Ukrainian refugees has challenged the asylum framework due to unprecedented demand for emergency protection and humanitarian aid hence; the contemporary development highlighted modifying role of Romania's in international refugee support because immediate aid needs conflict with the challenge of long-term social integration.

The existing literature discourse highlighted that integration hurdles exist for refugees despite the institutional engagement as Romanian government works with NGOs and public institutions to give legal, administrative and social support to refugees but Mareci et al. (2023) found that refugees still lack access to healthcare, education and housing. Campo et al. (2025) further added that the cultural and language hurdles majorly undermine the social and economic integration of the refugees while collectively the challenges demonstrated a misalignment between the policy framework of national agencies and practical experiences of the refugees. The national and international agencies played a vital role in developing the frameworks for Romanian refugee governance and institutions as Romanian National Council for Refugees (CNRR) was founded in 1998 to support refugees with legal aid, counselling and training (Nicolescu, 2019). The National Agency for Refugees (NAR) also monitors asylum proceedings and refugee rights under Romanian legislation, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (Andreea et al., 2024) but Balsam (2023) found that budgetary limitations and capacity pressures undermine comprehensive integration support delivery by NAR. However, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as in international body supported over 20 million refugees and working with NAR and CNRR since 1951 for implementing the EU specific policies like Common European Asylum System (CEAS), Dublin Regulation and Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) policies (Moldovan, 2022); the framework placed Romania as a developing but challenged European refugee protection player struggling for the balance of humanitarian commitments with institutional and financial limitations.

The methodology of the research is based on examining Romanian refugee policy through public perception and social meaning under the interpretivist philosophy because according to Burdine et al. (2021) and Sanchez et al. (2023) interpretivism emphasised on subjective experiences and interpretations; which are necessary to understand the Romanian perspectives on refugee arrivals and policy frameworks. The interpretation of refugee policy allows a comprehensive understanding of historical, cultural and social circumstances determining public opinion and policy approval while accounting diverse public sentiments supports policymakers in developing context-sensitive decisions (Emery and Anderman, 2020). Following the interpretivist design, the research process adopted deductive

approach by using migration, social cohesion and public policy theories and literature; deduction allowed the examination of social and individual effects of refugee arrivals in Romania (Gilgun, 2019). The research process employed quantitative design to ensure objectivity and statistical dependability because Mosko and Delach (2021) affirmed that quantitative approaches are viable for measuring attitudes and perceptions across a larger population sample to compare demographic groupings and identify trends. A convenience-random sample of 100 Romanians completed an online, closed-ended questionnaire to collect primary data while this strategy collected refugee policy data efficiently and from multiple perspectives (Kaliyadan and Kulkarni, 2019). The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse survey results using descriptive statistics like frequency analysis (Rahman and Muktadir, 2021) as primary yet context-specific data was relevant and aligned with the objectives of the study to overcome secondary data limitations.

2. Literature Review

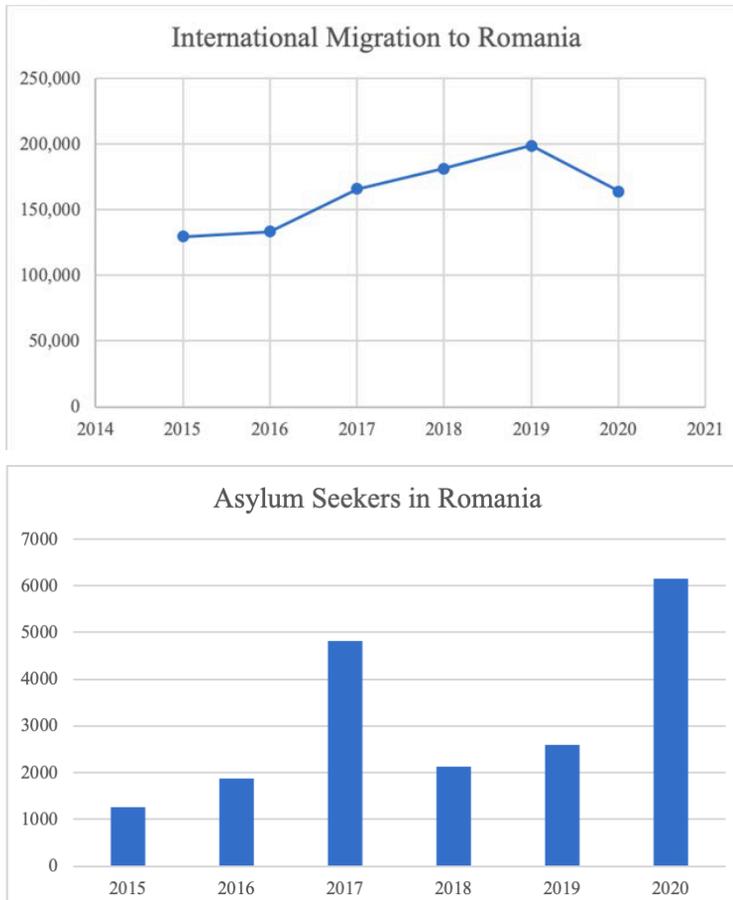
2.1. Refugee Policy Frameworks in Romania

The growth of Romanian refugee policy in Romania analysed in the context of globalisation, geopolitical instability and humanitarian crisis across the existing literature discourse as Goga (2020) and Mocanu et al. (2020) found that the 2015-2016 European refugee crisis forced European states to reassess their border management, asylum laws and humanitarian commitments but Popovici et al. (2021) stated that cautious yet cooperative reaction of Romania including the admission of 1,785 asylum seekers, met EU objectives while admitting domestic institutional limits. The transition of Romania from communism (post-1989) changed the mobility patterns and regulatory institutions, affecting migration governance under which Niemann and Zaun (2023) illustrated that Romania adopted international asylum standards like the 1951 Refugee Convention, EU asylum directives and UNHCR mandates after EU accession. However, Cebrián et al. (2010) argued that that national migration policy of Romania initially lacked the institutional capacity to comprehensively operationalise international asylum requirements which consequently reflected the need for stronger EU legislative instruments. Mareci et al. (2023) established that Romania has steadily established policy instruments to control asylum, residency permits and migrant integration despite not publically recognising refugees as a highly politicised issue. Following the modifications in policy instruments, the migration profile of Romania is associated with liberal entrance procedures, flexible investment legislation and regional mobility arrangements, especially with Moldova and Ukraine (Rîșteiu et al., 2022) hence; the flexible measures improved mobility but created governance issues linked to monitoring, social services and long-term integration.

2.2. Demographic Changes and Migration Trends in Romania

Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) and intra-EU mobility have modified the demographics of Romania over the past decade because Marchand et al. (2019) and Petrișor (2020) reported that Romania's foreign-born population witnessed a gradual increase (2013-2020) demonstrating its expanding importance as a destination rather than a transit country while Moldovan et al. (2023) added that TCNs without Romanian or EU citizenship migrates to Romania for work, family reunification, education and international protection (Figure 1). Moraru and Nica (2020) reported that inward migration surged by 278% across 2009 to 2019 yet foreign-born inhabitants still make up a minor official portion of the population while Eurostat reported that labour migrants are the largest category of foreign-born inhabitants, followed by family members, international students and short-term workers (Besoiu, 2022) thus; the inward trend reflected that demographics of Romania is impacted by the confounding factors of employment markets, public services and social cohesion.

Figure 1: Trends and Segmentation of Refugees to Romania



(Source: White Paper on the Integration of Refugees in Romania: Bejan, 2021)

Moreover, Nakase (2022) cited that demographic diversity of Romania is expected to rise due to EU and non-EU migrants but this expected shift associated with opportunities and problems as Rowe et al. (2019) highlighted that migrants provide skills, labour and innovation that enhance economic growth and competitiveness however; Stoica et al. (2020) argued that growing cultural, linguistic and social variety requires public institutions to create inclusive and adaptable policies. The demographic change also raised integration capability and policy preparation concerns as legal admittance methods and comprehensive education, healthcare, housing and social participation plans are needed therefore; Radulescu et al. (2020) recommends that understanding TCN migration drivers and effects is important for establishing strategies that balance economic advantages and social stability.

2.3. Refugee Governance, Integration Processes and Policy Challenges

The refugee policies and asylum system of Romania protects and processes asylum applicants under EU and UNHCR guidelines (Mareci et al., 2023) but Molinero-Gerbeau et al. (2021) and Cimpoeru (2023) found that asylum numbers of Romania are moderate in comparison to other states of the EU but the applications rise majorly Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Bangladesh during 2016 and 2020; the rise of application reflected the global regional insecurity along with the expanding host status of Romania. The integration outcomes are uneven in Romania despite the formal compliance of the governance procedures with European asylum criteria but Porumbescu (2019) cited that refugees faced persistent challenges to healthcare, housing, education and job markets compared to skilled migrants while Gherghina and Miscoiu (2025) found that integration plans categorise refugees with other migrants; reducing the humanitarian focus needed to manage forced displacement challenges. According to Cimpoeru et al. (202) the integration of refugees is considered a multifaceted process including social, economic, political and psychological aspects but Romania's integration structure appears to favour administrative compliance over long-term social inclusion (Gherghina, 2021) while Jianu (2019) further added legal uncertainty during status determination, limited permanent residency and insufficient institutional support make asylum seekers vulnerable.

Furthermore the resettlement and relocation policies further highlighted the structural flaws as Mészáros (2019) cited that resettlement quota averages 40 people each year with low EU relocation participation however, relocation programs try to spread responsibilities among EU member states as Poli (2021) argued that insufficient consultation with

refugees and host communities undermine policy effectiveness. The existing discourse of literature highlighted major gaps in Romanian refugee policy, lived experiences and long-term implication because cultural behaviours, intersectional identities and demographic changes are neglected across the discourse while legal frameworks and short-term reactions dominates the analytical discourse (Taha, 2019; Fratsea and Papadopoulos, 2020) hence; the existing gaps must be addressed to create inclusive yet evidence-based refugee policies aligning with humanitarian commitments and national capabilities.

3. Data Analysis

3.1. Public Support for Refugee Reception and Welfare Provision in Romania

The statistical analysis of survey data revealed that 96% of the respondents agreed on the reception of refugees in Romania because Romanians historically support humanitarianism, solidarity and empathy. The exceptionally high level of public support for refugee reception in Romania contrasted to European public opinion trends; Walentek et al. (2025) found varying refugee reception opinion due to the factors of economic conditions, political debate and media framing yet the Romanian perception challenges prevalent stereotypes that link Eastern European states to refugee exclusion. The refugee's protection is a policy responsibility because instead of symbolic framework it directly associated with housing, education and healthcare supports for the refugees; the human rights-based asylum governance emphasised on access to essential services for dignity and social integration (Cerna, 2019). However, De Graauw and Bloemraad (2017) established that positive public reception is an important success factor of successful refugee integration because acceptance of welfare services legitimises state investment and mitigate political resistance to inclusive policies.

Moreover, the high extent of reception is also associated with certain complex aspects as high public support potentially reflects the Romania's weak exposure to refugee settlement experience compared to Western European states. Ragnarsdóttir et al. (2023) found that countries with minimal direct competition for housing, jobs and welfare resources have more positive public sentiments thus; the supportive sentiments of Romanian are not challenged by long-term integration issues since Romania has a comparatively lower refugee inflow than other EU states. The social desirability bias also affects the survey responses on the moral issues like refugee protection as Alcaraz et al. (2019) found that public respondents often express socially acceptable humanitarian perspectives even with fundamental concerns; demonstrating that refugee admission is morally

supported by the fundamental concerns can arise by shifting economic or political situations hence the insights highlighted a positive social environment for refugee policy implementation while providing policymakers a strong foundation to increase integration and public involvement programs.

3.2. Perceived Impact of Refugees on Personal Freedom and Social Values

The datasets highlighted that 91% of respondents trust Romania's policy framework and governance capacity and perceived refugees harmless for their personal liberties or societal values; the securitisation narratives in migration literature often categorises refugees as risks to cultural identity, social cohesiveness or individual liberty (Bivand Erdal et al., 2022) but majority of the Romanians disagree that refugees threaten their personal autonomy or national values. The perceived positive impact among the Romanians associated with the policy legitimacy as Gherghina (2021) found that local citizens concerned less about the loss of control or social disruption with organised and regulated refugee governance aligned with national objectives. The compliance of Romani with EU asylum criteria and international law also provide institutional reassurance while Papadopoulos and Fratsea (2022) illustrated that public views often modify from perceived cultural threat to pragmatic governance due to trust in policy procedures.

The high level of positive perception associated with certain risks as some of the respondents still concerned about getting better jobs or public services which reflected "welfare chauvinism," associated with the coexistence of support for humanitarian protection and fears for unfair resource distribution; 9% respondents claimed an impact on personal freedom but these concerns reflect possible fault lines that could worsen during economic stress or increased unemployment. Stoica et al. (2020) cited that unfair advantage instead of cultural diversity promotes the public hostility to refugee integration however; Romania's historical migration patterns explained the low threat perception but Vasile et al. (2019) added that Romanian society is more empathetic towards displaced populations due to its vast diaspora and outward migration. Following the variability in perception (mostly positive), the shared migratory mentality increases refugee tolerance which implied that Romanian public perception is generally positive and non-threatening yet; proactive policy strategies are needed to address fairness, access and long-term integration sustainability issues.

3.3. Equality, Fairness and Institutional Trust in Refugee Governance

The survey datasets found that 90% of respondents perceived that current national policies treat refugees and Romanian citizens equally,

indicating positive public trust in institutional justice and legal parity; perceived equality before the law in refugee administration is important to social cohesion and public acceptability of migration policy (Cerna, 2019). Romania believes that within the current policy framework, refugees are treated effectively because the policy implication aligned with international human rights norms along with the 1951 Refugee Convention and EU asylum directives that promote non-discrimination and equitable access to basic services. The datasets further highlighted that 95% of respondents do not recognise refugees as a criminal or security threat, contradicting with European public discourse on forced migration (Erdal et al., 2022) and further reflected that Romanian society primarily resists recognising immigrants via a lens of criminality; driven by political rhetoric and media sensationalism in other European contexts (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019).

Furthermore, 10% of the respondents concerned that social services, EU financing and financial aid would favour Ukrainian refugees; demonstrating a misalignment between equality in theory and perceived inequality in practice. The difficulties of perceived inequality in practice are common across the migration studies as Stoica et al. (2020) found that emergency humanitarian responses generate visible resource allocation that can be misunderstood as preferential treatment rather than crisis-driven action hence; the EU and UNHCR based funds for Ukrainian migrants can unintentionally promote inequity over the policy implications. The primary UNHCR engagement in Romania mitigates the public reservations on policy supports as legal, emergency and relocation support from UNHCR and Romanian authorities ensure public confidence in refugee administration with transparent communication (Mareci et al., 2023). The current asylum policies of Romania are supported by crisis management and rights protection expertise of UNHCR from over 120 countries however; the concerns of respondents related to rising economic pressures emphasised over the necessity for balanced refugee support policies that avoid unfairness to maintain public trust via transparent funding sources and policy goals.

3.4. Security Narratives and Need for Policy Transparency

The datasets illustrated the negative assumptions related illegal immigration and political instability in home countries of refugees can lead to crime and security issues in the regions of Romania as migration literature of Papadopoulos and Fratsea (2022) found that disinformation and generalisation promoted anti-refugee sentiment hence; the datasets affirmed that only a minority holds such concerns but it reflects that negative assumptions associated with policy-level ignorance rather than rivalry. According to Fratsea and Papadopoulos (2020) the confusing refugees with irregular migrants interchangeably impaired public discourse as refugees

are granted international protection because they are exposed to conflict or instability while irregular migration is based on legal admission rather than security however; majority of the respondents do not associate refugees with crime highlighting the efficacy of legal and institutional systems.

Cimpoeru et al. (2023) found that EU and UNHCR aligned integration policies of Romania including healthcare, housing, education and integration centres reduced fear-based narratives; the strong policy framework support the integration of refugees and promoted their identity as rights-holders rather than security threats however, some of the respondents still stressed over the necessity for asylum procedure transparency. The transparency about asylum procedures, funding and eligibility minimises public concern and disinformation to address the public myths via public awareness efforts because as per Gherghina (2021) single incidences or political narratives can disproportionately affect public opinion even in supportive societies. The dataset collectively highlighted that asylum system of Romania is institutionally solid but communication-poor as policies are mostly effective but civic education, media partnership and community participation would improve understanding and eliminate security myths (Gabriel, 2023) hence; generally inclusive refugee policy climate and long-term community acceptance in Romania is depended on transparency and education to eliminate public negative assumptions.

4. Contributions and Recommendations

The research associated with key contributions to refugee governance research and policy in Romania as primarily it provides empirical survey-based data on Romanian public perception on equality, security and institutional confidence for refugees; the legal frameworks and refugee lived experiences dominated Romanian refugee policy literature but this research addresses a vital gap by highlighting public opinion while illustrating that refugee policy framework of Romani is supported by a sympathetic yet non-securitised population. The study highlights that policy legitimacy is not only determined by legal compliance with EU and UNHCR frameworks but also majorly associated with public perception in refugee policy; demonstrating that perceived fairness, transparency and social trust supported the policy legitimacy of Romania. The inclusive sentiments of Romanian people (contrasting with other EU regions) reflected the efficiency of regulated and legally compliant refugee governing mechanisms; conflicting with the principle that Eastern European states are universally opposed to refugee support.

The contributions lead to following important recommendations:

- Romania should improve asylum and financial transparency as clear communication about eligibility requirements, decision-making timescales and national welfare budgets against EU or UNHCR-funded aid will decrease preferential treatment myths and strengthen institutional confidence
- The refugee policy should institutionalise public awareness and civic education because government agencies should communicate refugee rights, obligations and integration paths with UNHCR, civil society and media; these efforts would eliminate disinformation and maintain public support
- Romania should prioritise community-based inclusion above administrative integration as the language training, labour market access and local integration centres should be extended and funded to address cultural and social hurdles found in literature and public perceptions; strengthening integration outcomes will benefit refugees and reduce host-society concerns about fairness and competition for strengthening social cohesion

5. Conclusion

The research examined Romanian refugee policy via public perception and empirical data in European, institutional and humanitarian contexts because Romania is in a unique situation as a new host state due to the growing number of refugees, the 2015–2016 refugee crisis and the recent entry of Ukrainian refugees thus; Romania must balance humanitarian duties with institutional and financial constraints. The datasets of the survey highlighted that majority of the Romanians support housing, assisting and legal equality for migrants as minimal numbers of citizen associated crimes or equality threat with the refugee; the positive perception and optimism conflicted with securitised narratives of certain European regions. The positive perception of Romanian and reception for the refugees also highlighted that institutional trust, EU alignment and UNHCR influenced the public perception on the national policies; study also found that Romania's compliance with international and EU asylum requirements enhanced refugee governance trust and strengthened humanitarian protection.

The survey insights also highlighted certain concerns including resource utilisation, process transparency and long-term integration but these concerns only associated with minority segment of the participant yet established the risk of elevated negative public perception on economy concerns or more refugees arrival; reflecting that refugee policy system of Romania has strong structures but poor communication under which the

false information or media stories can exploit public knowledge gaps. The refugee integration policies of Romania are effective in legal, economic and social aspects as the strong governance and support in healthcare, employment and anti-discrimination reflected the strategic focus towards contributing to the society. However, the modifying legal and policy climate improves opportunities for Romania but effective refugee policies require legal clarity with political and social inclusion hence; the proactive strategy of Romania must combine morality and national interests while supporting refugee rights, integration and community measures via global collaboration.

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Religion, Confessional Communities, and State–Church Relations in the Republic of Moldova

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Abstract

Religion occupies a central position in the social, cultural, and political life of the Republic of Moldova, a post-Soviet state marked by high levels of religiosity, contested national identity, and persistent geopolitical polarization. This article examines the role of religion in Moldovan society by analysing the configuration of confessional communities and the evolving relationship between religious institutions and the state. It argues that while Moldova formally adheres to principles of religious freedom and state neutrality, informal practices and symbolic hierarchies continue to privilege dominant religious actors, particularly Orthodox institutions. Drawing on contemporary debates in the sociology of religion and political science, the article explores how religion functions simultaneously as a source of social cohesion, a marker of identity, and a tool of political mobilisation. The analysis highlights the tension between democratic norms of equality and pluralism on the one hand, and the instrumentalisation of religion in identity politics and geopolitical narratives on the other. By situating the Moldovan case within broader post-Soviet and Eastern European contexts, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on religion, governance, and democratic resilience in transitional societies.

Keywords

Religion, Orthodoxy, state–church relations, pluralism, identity politics, Republic of Moldova

1. Introduction and Methodology

More than three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, religion remains one of the most influential and contested dimensions of public life in the Republic of Moldova. Contrary to early post-independence expectations that secularisation would accompany democratic transition and Europeanisation, Moldovan society has experienced a pronounced religious revival. Surveys consistently place Moldova among the most religious countries in Europe, with high levels of belief, ritual participation, and trust in religious institutions. This revival, however, has not been confined to the private sphere. Instead, religion has become deeply

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embedded in public discourse, political competition, and debates over national identity. The prominence of religion in Moldova cannot be understood solely in theological or spiritual terms. Rather, it reflects a complex interaction between historical legacies, institutional arrangements, and contemporary political struggles. Under Soviet rule, religion was officially marginalised and subjected to systematic repression. Yet religious traditions, particularly Orthodoxy, survived as cultural and symbolic resources, closely intertwined with notions of *ethnicity, language, and historical continuity*. Following independence in 1991, these resources were rapidly reactivated, filling the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of communism and contributing to the redefinition of collective identity.

At the same time, Moldova's post-Soviet transformation has been marked by persistent ambiguity regarding its national project and geopolitical orientation. The country's divided identity, variously framed as Moldovan, Romanian, or civic, has intersected with competing narratives about Europe, Russia, and the post-Soviet space.

Religion has played a significant role in these narratives, often serving as a symbolic anchor for broader political and cultural alignments. Orthodox Christianity, in particular, has been mobilised as a marker of authenticity, tradition, and moral order, frequently positioned in opposition to perceived external threats such as liberalism, secularism, or Western influence.

This article examines the role of religion in Moldovan society through the lens of confessional communities and state - church relations. It seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of religiosity by analysing how religious institutions interact with political power, how pluralism is structured and constrained, and how religion is mobilised in public debates. The central argument is that despite formal commitments to religious freedom and state neutrality, Moldova exhibits a pattern of asymmetric pluralism in which dominant religious actors enjoy privileged access to symbolic and institutional resources. At the same time, minority confessions face structural and discursive disadvantages. By focusing on the interplay between religion, identity, and governance, the article addresses a broader theoretical question relevant to post-Soviet and Eastern European contexts: *how does religion shape democratic trajectories in societies where institutional secularism coexists with high public religiosity and contested identities?* The Moldovan case offers valuable insights into this question, revealing both the integrative and destabilising potential of religion in transitional democracies.

2. Post-Soviet Identity Formation

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, religion has re-emerged as a significant public force across much of Eastern Europe. In the Republic of

Moldova, this resurgence has been particularly pronounced. Empirical studies consistently indicate high levels of religious belief and trust in religious institutions, placing Moldova among the most religious societies on the European continent (Carnevale 2019; Soros Foundation Moldova, 2023). Far from being confined to the private sphere, religion has become deeply embedded in public discourse, political competition, and debates over national identity.

This development challenges classical secularisation assumptions that linked modernisation to the marginalisation of religion in public life. Instead, the Moldovan case confirms broader findings from post-socialist contexts, where religious revival has accompanied processes of nation-building and political transition (Karpov, Lisovskaia, and Barry, 2012). Religion, particularly Orthodox Christianity, has served as a reservoir of symbolic meaning and moral authority in a society marked by institutional fragility, economic uncertainty, and unresolved identity conflicts.

The institutional development of churches in the territory of present-day Moldova was profoundly shaped by the Soviet policy of state atheism and the broader system of religious governance imposed after the incorporation of Bessarabia into the USSR in 1940. Rather than aiming at the immediate elimination of religion, Soviet authorities sought to subject religious life to strict administrative control, marginalizing it as a potential source of social authority and political loyalty outside the Communist Party. The long-term objective was to erode religious influence gradually, allowing religious institutions to survive only in a highly circumscribed and depoliticized form (Bercken, 1989: 107-109).

In the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, the Orthodox Church was prohibited from engaging openly in public debate or from articulating independent moral or social positions. At the same time, atheism was actively promoted through the educational system, cultural institutions, and mass organizations as an integral component of socialist socialization. Clergy were denied access to key public institutions such as schools, hospitals, and the military, and pastoral activity was confined almost exclusively to liturgical functions within registered places of worship. Religious education of minors was discouraged or informally sanctioned, reinforcing the privatization of religious practice (Hug, 2015: 7).

The Orthodox Church in Moldova, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, experienced periodic waves of repression, most notably during the Stalinist campaigns of the late 1940s and early 1950s and again during Khrushchev's renewed anti-religious drive in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These periods of intensified persecution were interspersed with phases of relative tolerance, during which church authorities were permitted limited

institutional survival in exchange for political loyalty and compliance with state regulations. This pattern fostered a mode of ecclesiastical adaptation characterized less by overt resistance than by pragmatic accommodation to state power.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church came under the “patronage” of the new Russian state, reviving the old tradition of caesaropapism characteristic of the Tsarist period. This development mechanically entailed the reintegration of the Orthodox dimension into Russia’s neo-imperial ideology, insofar as the Church remained the only surviving “custodian”—albeit in a spiritual sense—of the borders of the former empire. According to the Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church, its jurisdiction encompasses Orthodox believers living within the Church’s canonical territory (the geographical area under an ecclesiastical authority), which includes Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Estonia, as well as other Orthodox believers residing in different countries who have voluntarily adhered to this jurisdiction (Țugui, 2011: 3-5).

This legacy has had lasting consequences for post-Soviet Moldova. Unlike some Western narratives that emphasize dissident religiosity and underground religious activism, the Moldovan Orthodox experience was marked predominantly by institutional endurance through accommodation rather than sustained confrontation. As a result, after 1991 the Orthodox Church re-emerged not primarily as a vehicle of moral opposition or civil resistance, but as a culturally authoritative institution closely aligned with state structures and national identity formation. The memory of Soviet repression nevertheless continues to shape public discourse, reinforcing perceptions of the Church as a historical victim while simultaneously legitimizing its contemporary claims to social authority and public influence. Similar to other post-Soviet nations, Moldova initially saw a tremendous increase in the number of official believers and the registration of a wide variety of churches following the fall of the Soviet Union (Munteanu, 2015: 161).

With the 94,3% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024) of its citizens officially identifying as Orthodox, Moldova, along with Greece, has the largest percentage of Orthodox believers among all Central and Eastern European nations (Pew Research Center, 2017: 49-50). Furthermore, in Orthodox-majority societies across the region, a substantial majority of adults emphasize the importance of Orthodoxy to national identity, with a median of 70 % associating national belonging with being Orthodox (Pew Research Center, 2017: 9).

According to the 2024 Census out of the total population of 2,409.2 thousand persons, 2,391.1 thousand (99.2%) responded to the question on religious affiliation, while only 18.1 thousand (0.8%) did not declare any confessional affiliation. Affiliation with a religious denomination was declared by 2,354.2 thousand persons, of whom an absolute majority—2,271.1 thousand (94.3%)—identified themselves as Orthodox. Among other religious denominations, the most numerous were members of Neo-Protestant churches, including Baptists (26.2 thousand or 1.1%), Pentecostals (12.6 thousand or 0.5%), Adventists (6.9 thousand or 0.3%), Evangelical Christians (6.3 thousand or 0.3%), as well as Jehovah's Witnesses (16.5 thousand or 0.7%). Other denominations with more significant shares included Old Believers / the Russian Orthodox Church of the Old Rite (*staroobryadtsy*) (4.0 thousand or 0.2%), Catholics (2.5 thousand or 0.1%), and Muslims (3.1 thousand or 0.1%). Adherents of other religions accounted for 4.7 thousand persons or 0.2% of the population. A total of 36.8 thousand persons (1.5%) reported not belonging to any religious denomination, including 20.0 thousand without religion, 14.2 thousand atheists, 2.1 thousand agnostics, and 0.4 thousand free thinkers) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

Compared to the 2014 census, the confessional structure of the population did not undergo major changes, with the notable exception of the share of persons who did not declare their religion, which declined substantially—from 6.4% in 2014 to 0.8% in 2024. At the same time, the proportion of those declaring themselves without religion increased by 0.8 percentage points, atheists by 0.4 percentage points, as well as agnostics and free thinkers) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

In the separatist Transnistria region, *de facto* authorities estimate 80 percent of the population belongs to the MOC. Other religious groups in the region include Catholics, followers of Old Rite Russian Orthodoxy, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical and charismatic Christians, Jews, Lutherans, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses (US department of State, 2023).

Belonging to one of the two Orthodox jurisdictions in Moldova—the *Moldovan Orthodox Church*, operating under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the *Bessarabian Orthodox Church*, subordinated to the Romanian Orthodox Church, can be understood as a secondary effect of the broader cleavage between Moldovan and Romanian identity narratives. From a linguistic perspective, Moldovan and Romanian are virtually identical languages; nevertheless, political and symbolic distinctions between the two identities have been institutionalized and reproduced through religious structures. Both Orthodox churches have developed explicit ambitions to intervene in the public sphere, including in areas

traditionally associated with state sovereignty such as domestic politics and foreign policy orientation. Their engagement extends beyond pastoral activity, positioning them as influential actors in debates over national identity, geopolitical alignment, and Moldova's relationship with external partners. In this context, religious affiliation functions not merely as a matter of personal belief, but as a marker of collective belonging and political orientation (Baar and Jakubek, 2017: 59-60).

3. Religion as a Public Institution

In Moldova religious affiliation is deeply intertwined with politics, national identity, and collective belonging, not just individual spirituality. Orthodoxy functions as a *symbolic public good* that political actors and parties use to anchor broader socio-political projects (Sprînceană, 2013).

The public relevance of religion in Moldova is closely connected to the country's contested national identity. Scholarly analyses have demonstrated that Moldovan identity remains divided along linguistic, historical, and geopolitical lines, producing competing narratives of belonging and statehood (Baar and Jakubek, 2017). Religion intersects with these divisions by providing symbolic resources that are mobilised in support of different political and cultural projects. Orthodoxy, in particular, is frequently invoked as a marker of authenticity, tradition, and continuity, often contrasted with liberal or "Western" values associated with European integration.

At the institutional level, Moldova formally adheres to principles of religious freedom and state neutrality. The Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and equality of religious denominations before the law. The state must acknowledge and protect every citizen's freedom to maintain, grow, and express their religious identity, according to the constitution. It guarantees freedom of conscience, expressed in "a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect," and religious worship, and it ensures that all people are treated equally regardless of their religious beliefs. It states that religious organizations are free to organize and function in accordance with their own laws and are not subject to official interference. All religious organizations are forbidden under the constitution from employing, expressing, or promoting hostility or enmity in their interactions with one another. According to the constitution, the state must encourage religious practice, including providing religious support in the army, hospitals, jails, nursing homes, and orphanages (Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, 1994).

There is no state religion in Moldova, however the *Law on Religious Denominations and Their Constituent Parts* as the *Law on Freedom of Conscience, Thought and Religion, and on the Organization and Functioning*

of *Religious Entities* (Law nr.278/2011)², thought and religion emphasizes that “the State recognizes the importance and the primary role of the Christian Orthodox religion, namely, the Moldovan Orthodox Church in the life, history and culture of Moldova” (Suveica and Sprinceana, 2015: 106).

The formal procedure for the registration of religious organizations in the Republic of Moldova is, in principle, uniform across denominations. The most illustrative case concerns the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia, established in 1992 and canonically subordinated to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Moldovan authorities repeatedly refused its registration, invoking the risk of internal Orthodox conflict and public disorder, arguments that were ultimately rejected by the European Court of Human Rights, which found a violation of religious freedom and obliged the state to grant legal recognition. The resistance to registration was particularly strong during the Communist Party’s period in power (2001–2009), when the Church’s association with Romanian Orthodoxy was perceived as incompatible with a state-sponsored Moldovan identity project. As human rights scholarship has emphasized, state neutrality requires the registration of all religious organizations that meet legal criteria, without privileging or limiting particular denominations. Nonetheless, both before and after the ECHR ruling, Moldovan authorities have continued to apply differential standards, including delays in the registration of Muslim and Pentecostal communities, reflecting a persistent Orthodox majoritarian bias in the interpretation and implementation of the law.

Despite the formal guarantees of religious freedom, multiple reports indicate the persistence of societal discrimination and hostility based on religious affiliation in the Republic of Moldova. Such incidents are particularly salient in smaller towns and rural areas, where members of Jehovah’s Witnesses have reported recurrent verbal harassment and, in some cases, physical aggression. Although complaints were filed with law

² In the process of revising the legal framework governing religion, Moldovan authorities proposed renaming the *Law on Religious Denominations and Their Constituent Parts* as the *Law on Freedom of Conscience, Thought and Religion, and on the Organization and Functioning of Religious Entities*. According to the Minister of Justice, this change was necessary to eliminate a discrepancy between the law’s title and its actual object of regulation, since Article 1 refers broadly to freedom of conscience and religion, while the previous title suggested a narrow focus on religious denominations alone. The revised title was also intended to align the legislation with European legal standards in the field of religious freedom. In the same reform package, the term “religious denomination” (*cult religios*) was replaced with “religious organization,” and the registration procedure was clarified by explicitly listing the required documents in the law. Furthermore, the registration deadline for religious organizations was harmonized with the general timeframe applicable to other non-commercial organizations, namely 30 days (IPN, 2011).

enforcement authorities, available evidence suggests a lack of effective accountability, as perpetrators were rarely identified or sanctioned, pointing to weaknesses in the practical enforcement of legal protections.

Antisemitic incidents further illustrate the vulnerability of religious minorities in the public sphere. On 11 September, the Chabad Lubavitch Synagogue in Chişinău was vandalised with swastikas and SS symbols. While the Acting President Mihai Ghimpu publicly condemned the act and stated that it did not reflect the values of Moldovan society, the investigation remained ongoing at the end of the reporting period, underscoring challenges in addressing hate-motivated crimes.

Tensions surrounding religious symbols in public space were also evident during a public demonstration on 10 November, when several hundred Orthodox believers protested against the proposed installation of a menorah in a central park near a monument associated with medieval Christian statehood. Statements by representatives of Orthodox youth organisations framed the presence of the menorah as an affront to Christian identity. In response, Mayor Dorin Chirtoacă intervened to mediate the dispute, ultimately facilitating the menorah's placement within the courtyard of the Jewish Cultural Center, where its dedication proceeded without incident.

Taken together, these cases highlight the gap between formal religious freedom and its social realization, revealing how dominant religious identities can inform informal boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in public space. They also illustrate how local authorities may play a crucial mediating role in preventing escalation, even as underlying patterns of religious majoritarianism and social intolerance persist (US Department of State, 2011).

The *Islamic League of Moldova* reported that municipal authorities in Chişinău twice rejected its formal requests for a designated plot of land for Islamic burials within the state-administered cemetery. These refusals occurred despite legal provisions granting all registered religious organisations the right to burial space in public cemeteries. Requests submitted by the Muslim community in January and March were denied by the mayoralty, underscoring the discretionary nature of local decision-making and the vulnerability of minority confessions to administrative exclusion. Similar tensions have been reported by the *Catholic Diocese of Chişinău*, which has repeatedly raised concerns regarding the compatibility of Moldova's registration legislation with Catholic canon law. According to representatives of the Catholic Church, canon law accords bishops the authority to establish parishes and appoint clergy, whereas Moldovan legislation requires that newly registered religious communities be

constituted through initiatives of lay members, with leadership elected internally. Longstanding written complaints submitted by the Diocese to state authorities have remained unaddressed, highlighting structural frictions between universal religious governance systems and nationally defined regulatory frameworks (US State Department, 2023).

These cases reveal how ostensibly neutral legal norms can produce disproportionate constraints on minority confessions, particularly those whose internal organisational principles diverge from the assumptions embedded in national legislation. However, a growing body of research suggests that these formal guarantees coexist with informal arrangements that privilege dominant religious actors, especially Orthodox institutions (Carnevale 2019). This discrepancy between legal norms and social practices raises critical questions about the nature of secularism, pluralism, and democratic governance in Moldova.

The concept of religious freedom employed in this article moves beyond a purely legal-normative understanding and adopts a context-grounded perspective. Classical liberal theory conceptualizes religious freedom primarily as an individual right, protected through constitutional guarantees and international legal instruments (Dworkin 1986). In post-authoritarian and post-Soviet contexts, however, the practical realization of religious freedom is deeply shaped by historical legacies, informal power relations, and the asymmetric positioning of religious communities vis-à-vis the state. Sociological approaches emphasize that religious freedom is not only a matter of formal equality before the law, but also of *de facto* access to public recognition, material resources, and symbolic legitimacy. In many post-Soviet societies, including Moldova, formal guarantees of equality coexist with informal practices that reproduce privilege and exclusion. Carnevale (2019) demonstrates that in Moldova, Orthodox institutions benefit from preferential treatment in areas such as public visibility, access to state officials, and symbolic recognition. Minority confessions, while legally recognised, often encounter bureaucratic obstacles and social prejudice. This pattern reflects broader post-Soviet dynamics, where dominant religions are closely associated with national culture and political legitimacy.

From a formal legal perspective, the Republic of Moldova recognises religious pluralism. The *Constitution* (1994, art. 31) guarantees *freedom of conscience and the equality of religious denominations before the law*, while the *Law on Religious Denominations and Their Constituent Parts* as the *Law on Freedom of Conscience, Thought and Religion, and on the Organization and Functioning of Religious Entities* (Law nr.278/2011) establishes procedures for registration and operation of religious communities. In theory, this framework reflects international standards on freedom of religion and belief.

However, empirical research consistently shows that legal pluralism coexists with a hierarchical religious order in practice. This asymmetry is not unique to Moldova but reflects broader post-Soviet patterns in which dominant religious traditions are closely linked to national culture and political legitimacy (Karpov, Lisovskaia, and Barry 2012). In such contexts, the distinction between cultural heritage and religious privilege becomes blurred, complicating the implementation of neutral state policies.

Orthodox dominance is manifested in multiple domains of public life. Orthodox symbols and rituals are integrated into national commemorations, public ceremonies, and educational contexts. Clergy frequently participate in state-sponsored events, and Orthodox discourse shapes public debates on morality, family, and social values (Doroftei 2018). These practices contribute to the perception of Orthodoxy as the default or “natural” religion of the nation. Importantly, Orthodox influence is not exercised solely through institutional channels but also through symbolic authority. Orthodox leaders are often perceived as moral arbiters whose opinions carry weight beyond their religious constituency. This moral authority enables Orthodox institutions to intervene in political debates without formally engaging in party politics, thereby maintaining plausible deniability while exerting real influence.

Alongside the Orthodox majority, Moldova hosts a variety of minority confessions, including *Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jewish communities, and a small Muslim population*. These groups differ significantly in size, organisation, and historical presence, yet they share common challenges stemming from their marginal position within the religious hierarchy.

Empirical studies and policy reports indicate that minority confessions often face bureaucratic obstacles in registration, property restitution, and access to public space (Soros Foundation Moldova 2023, US State Department, 2011, US State Department, 2023). While such obstacles are rarely codified in law, they emerge through administrative discretion and local-level practices, highlighting the importance of informal governance in shaping religious freedom.

Social attitudes toward minority religions further compound these institutional challenges. Surveys conducted by the *Council for the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality* (PPEDAE 2014) reveal persistent stereotypes and distrust toward certain religious groups, particularly those perceived as “*non-traditional*” or externally connected. These perceptions reflect broader patterns of social exclusion and are closely linked to narratives of national identity and moral order.

The asymmetric structure of the confessional landscape has important implications for *democracy and social cohesion*. *On the one hand*, the dominance of Orthodoxy provides a shared cultural reference point that can foster social solidarity. *On the other hand*, it risks marginalising alternative identities and constraining the space for pluralism and dissent.

4. Religion, Values, and Political Mobilisation

Religion plays a structurally significant role in the political life of the Republic of Moldova, where it is deeply intertwined with competing national identity projects and broader geopolitical narratives. In public discourse, religious affiliation—particularly Orthodox Christianity—is frequently associated with opposing geopolitical orientations, most notably the tension between European integration and alignment with Russia or the post-Soviet space. Within this context, Orthodoxy functions not only as a marker of religious belonging, but also as a symbolic bridge linking cultural identity, moral values, and geopolitical preference (Baar and Jakubek 2017).

From an analytical perspective, the political relevance of religion in Moldova can be understood through the interaction between two closely related processes: the *politicization of religion* and the *religionization of politics*. The politicization of religion refers to situations in which political or religious actors strategically invoke religious symbols, institutions, or moral authority in order to legitimize political actions, policy goals, or particular visions of social order (Zúquete 2017). In contrast, the religionization of politics describes a deeper transformation, whereby religious language and moral frameworks come to structure political competition itself, framing political conflict as a struggle between moral virtue and moral transgression (Yabancı and Taleski 2018). These processes are especially pronounced in societies characterized by high levels of religious identification and unresolved debates over national identity.

Given the exceptionally high proportion of the population identifying as Orthodox believers, Orthodoxy has become a central symbolic resource in competing national narratives in the Republic of Moldova. In the immediate post-independence period, the (pan-)Romanian identity project—most visibly promoted by the Popular Front of Moldova—conceptualized Moldova as an integral part of the Romanian nation, united by common language, historical memory, and Orthodox Christianity (Țicu 2016; Baar and Jakubek 2017). Within this framework, Orthodoxy functioned as a key marker of shared belonging, reinforcing claims for cultural and political reunification with Romania.

This identity narrative was institutionally reinforced by the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, which was re-established under the

jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church following the collapse of the Soviet regime. Although the Bessarabian Orthodox Church sought to present itself as the historical continuation of pre-Soviet Orthodoxy in the region, it encountered sustained political resistance from Moldovan authorities and obtained legal recognition only after a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights. This prolonged registration process illustrates the extent to which ecclesiastical pluralism was perceived as politically sensitive and potentially destabilizing in the context of contested national identity.

By contrast, the Moldovan Orthodox Church became increasingly embedded in the Moldovenist nation-building project, which emphasizes state sovereignty, political independence, and cultural distinctiveness from Romania (Țicu 2016). Rooted in the institutional legacy of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Moldovenist narrative depicts the inhabitants of Moldova as a distinct nation with its own historical trajectory, traditions, and cultural specificities. Within this framework, Orthodoxy is frequently invoked as a unifying moral and cultural foundation of national identity, reinforcing continuity and social cohesion (Carnevale 2019).

As the Orthodox institution with the largest number of adherents, the Moldovan Orthodox Church has been implicitly, and at times explicitly, framed by successive governments as the country's majority or "national" church. This perception is reflected both in political practice and in the legal framework regulating religious life. Although the Moldovan Constitution formally defines the state as secular and affirms the separation of church and state, the symbolic privileging of the Moldovan Orthodox Church has contributed to an asymmetric religious landscape. In this context, Orthodoxy functions not merely as a personal religious identity, but as a moralized framework through which political authority, national belonging, and legitimacy are articulated. This dynamic constitutes a clear example of the religionization of politics, whereby religious symbolism is mobilized to structure and legitimize competing political projects (Gohlke 2024).

These identity dynamics are further reinforced through media discourse and public debate, in which religious arguments are frequently mobilized to frame geopolitical choices in moral and civilizational terms. European integration is often portrayed as a threat to faith, tradition, and social cohesion, while alternative geopolitical alignments are presented as culturally and spiritually authentic (RFE/RL 2017). As a result, confessional affiliation increasingly functions as a proxy for broader ideological and geopolitical positions, intensifying political polarization and reinforcing value-based divisions within society.

Scholarly analyses link these developments to broader patterns of populism, in which religion supplies moral narratives that oppose a virtuous and “authentic” people to corrupt elites or external influences (DeHanas and Shterin 2018). In the Moldovan context, such narratives are frequently mobilized in opposition to European integration, gender equality policies, and minority rights, including LGBTQ+ protections (Doroftei 2018). Orthodox discourse on these issues typically frames them not as matters of individual rights or policy choice, but as existential threats to the moral foundations of the nation. By positioning themselves as defenders of tradition and faith, religious actors reinforce populist frames that resonate with segments of the population experiencing social insecurity, demographic decline, and geopolitical uncertainty (Baar and Jakubek, 2017).

Importantly, these domestic processes do not unfold in isolation from the broader geopolitical environment. The geopolitical use of religion by the Russian Federation—particularly through the institutional and symbolic resources of the Russian Orthodox Church, acquires concrete analytical relevance when examined at the level of domestic political arrangements in post-Soviet states. Following the so-called *colour revolutions* and the evident limits of overt political intervention, Russia increasingly recalibrated its external strategy by privileging soft power instruments, with Orthodoxy emerging as a key vehicle of influence in the “near abroad” (Tugui, 2011).

In Moldova, interaction between political elites and the Moldovan Orthodox Church reflects a process of selective accommodation, whereby religious authority is integrated into local strategies of political legitimation while remaining embedded within the canonical space of the Russian Orthodox Church. This configuration allows external influence to operate indirectly, through institutional continuity, symbolic practices, and reciprocal recognition between political and ecclesiastical elites³. The Moldovan case thus illustrates how religious soft power becomes effective

³ It is worth noting that Vladimir Voronin has been the recipient of several religious and religiously affiliated distinctions, reflecting a sustained pattern of symbolic recognition by Orthodox institutions. These include the Order of *Saint Equal-to-the-Apostles Grand Prince Vladimir*; the Order of *Saint Right-Believing Prince Dmitry Donskoy* (First Class), awarded in 2005 by the Russian Orthodox Church; the Order of *Prince Yaroslav the Wise* (First Class), conferred in 2005 by Ukraine; the Order of *The Pious Voivode Stephen the Great and Saint* (First Class), awarded in 2005 by the Moldovan Orthodox Church; and the Order of the *Holy Sepulchre*, conferred in 2009 by the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem. In addition, Voronin has received high state distinctions from Bulgaria, Croatia, and Greece. He is also the recipient of the award *For Outstanding Contribution to the Consolidation of the Unity of Orthodox Peoples* (2008), granted by the International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Peoples, and was named an honorary citizen of the city of Miletus in Greece in 2005 (Doroftei, 2018).

primarily through its alignment with domestic identity narratives and political interests, reinforcing the entanglement of religion, populism, and geopolitics in contemporary political mobilisation.

Recent electoral cycles in the Republic of Moldova (2024, 2025) have provided further empirical evidence of the informal involvement of religious actors in electoral mobilisation. Monitoring reports produced during the 2024 presidential election and the 2025 electoral cycle indicate that, while religious institutions did not formally endorse political parties or candidates, religious discourse and clerical authority were intermittently employed to frame electoral choices in moral and civilisational terms.

According to election observation reports published by Promo-LEX Association, several instances were documented in which clergy members publicly commented on political issues during religious services or community gatherings, particularly in rural areas (Promo-LEX, 2024). These interventions often emphasised the protection of *traditional values*, opposition to perceived moral decay, or the defence of national and spiritual identity, frames that implicitly resonated with specific political agendas without constituting explicit electoral endorsements.

Similar patterns were noted by international observers. The OSCE in its election assessment missions, highlighted the blurred boundaries between religious authority and political messaging, particularly where religious leaders addressed electoral themes in ways that could influence voters' perceptions. Although such practices did not generally violate electoral law, OSCE observers stressed that they risk undermining the principle of equal electoral competition by leveraging the high level of public trust enjoyed by religious institutions (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024). During the 2024–2025 period, religious narratives were also visible in public debates surrounding European integration, gender equality, and family policy—issues that featured prominently in electoral campaigns. As several civil society reports note, these topics were frequently framed by religious actors as existential threats to national morality or cultural continuity, thereby reinforcing value-based polarisation within the electorate (Soros Foundation Moldova, 2023). This form of mobilisation exemplifies what the literature describes as the religionization of politics, whereby religious symbolism and moral authority are used to structure political competition without direct institutional engagement in party politics.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the role of religion in Moldovan elections operates primarily through indirect and symbolic mechanisms rather than formal political participation. While such involvement remains largely informal, its cumulative effect contributes to the reinforcement of asymmetric pluralism within the public sphere,

privileging dominant religious narratives and shaping electoral behaviour in ways that challenge strict interpretations of political neutrality.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined the role of religion in the Republic of Moldova as a public institution embedded in processes of identity formation, political mobilisation, and geopolitical contestation. The analysis demonstrates that religion, particularly Orthodox Christianity, cannot be understood solely as a matter of individual belief, but must be approached as a structural component of Moldova's social and political order.

The findings reveal a persistent gap between formal legal guarantees of religious freedom and their practical implementation. Although Moldova's constitutional and legislative framework affirms equality among religious denominations, empirical evidence indicates the existence of an asymmetric confessional landscape. Orthodox institutions benefit from preferential access to symbolic recognition, public visibility, and informal political influence, while minority confessions often encounter administrative obstacles, social marginalisation, and uneven enforcement of legal protections. This pattern of asymmetric pluralism complicates conventional understandings of secularism and raises important questions about democratic equality and state neutrality.

At the level of identity politics, religion functions as a key symbolic resource through which competing national narratives are articulated. The division between Moldovan and Romanian identity projects is reproduced and institutionalised through the existence of parallel Orthodox jurisdictions, transforming ecclesiastical affiliation into a marker of collective belonging and political orientation. In this context, Orthodoxy contributes to the moralisation of politics, framing policy debates and geopolitical choices in terms of cultural authenticity and civilisational alignment.

The Moldovan case also illustrates how religious influence operates within broader regional dynamics. Situated within the canonical space of the Russian Orthodox Church, domestic church–state relations intersect with transnational networks of symbolic authority and historical memory. Rather than manifesting through direct political control, religious soft power functions through institutional continuity, symbolic practices, and reciprocal recognition between political and ecclesiastical elites.

External influence thus becomes effective primarily when aligned with domestic identity narratives and political interests. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of examining religion not only as a legal category or cultural tradition, but as a dynamic social institution embedded

in power relations. While the Moldovan case is shaped by specific historical and geopolitical conditions, the patterns identified here resonate with broader post-Soviet experiences. Understanding how religion structures public authority, inclusion, and exclusion is therefore essential for assessing the prospects of democratic pluralism and governance in societies marked by contested identities and post-imperial legacies.

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The Status of the Russian Language in the Republic of Moldova: An Indicator of Geopolitical and Sociocultural Transformations

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Abstract

The status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova represents a significant indicator of geopolitical and sociocultural transformations in the post-Soviet period. The historical legacy of the Soviet era granted Russian a dominant role in administration, education, and interethnic communication, an influence that continues to manifest in public and media spaces. Changes in the legislative framework concerning language policy reflect shifts in the country's geopolitical orientation, as well as the symbolic competition between European and Eurasian identity models. From a sociocultural perspective, the continued use of Russian highlights the multilingual character of Moldovan society, as well as the challenges in consolidating a common civic identity centered on the official language. In this context, the issue of the Russian language extends beyond the linguistic dimension, functioning as a political and identity tool relevant for analyzing transition processes and the redefinition of the Moldovan state.

This article seeks to examine the distinctive features of the Russian language's status in the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords

Republic of Moldova, the Russian language, status, society

Introduction and Methodology

The issue of the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova is not only of substantial academic interest, but is also at the center of political disputes. In the context of the state's multi-ethnic structure, the issue of regulating the status of the Russian language goes beyond simple linguistic questions and becomes a complex topic that intersects historical,

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identity, legal, and socio-political dimensions. This situation is particularly characteristic of states where the population is made up of diverse ethnic communities, each preserving its own cultural traditions, communication patterns, and linguistic choices.

In such societies, establishing the official status of a language is not just a technical and administrative matter, but has profound implications for social cohesion, the integration of minorities, and the consolidation of national identity. The Republic of Moldova is a relevant example in this regard, with a linguistic history marked by external political influences and significant regulatory changes. Russian, which is widely used, continues to hold an important position in public communication, the media, urban areas, and certain professional sectors, even after the country gained independence in 1991.

Discussions regarding the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova are also fueled by the divergent perspectives of social groups. On the one hand, there are voices that support maintaining a privileged status for Russian, arguing that it is necessary to respect the rights of minorities, but also because of the practical role of Russian as a language of interethnic communication in the post-Soviet space. On the other hand, there are opinions that emphasize the importance of affirming Romanian as a fundamental element of national identity and statehood consolidation, considering that a special status for Russian could perpetuate cultural and political dependencies.

Thus, the issue of the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova cannot be examined in isolation. Its analysis requires an interdisciplinary approach, integrating the perspective of geopolitical developments, identity-building processes, and data provided by sociological research, in accordance with the principles of national legislation and international law.

In order to analyze the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova, the present research is based on the use of a set of general and specific scientific research methods, designed to ensure a comprehensive, coherent, and rigorous approach to the phenomenon under study. Accordingly, the methods of analysis and deduction, the phenomenological method, the historical method, the comparative method, and the webographic method were applied. To highlight the presence of the Russian language in the regional context, including the Republic of Moldova, and to achieve a deeper understanding of the evolution of this phenomenon from a diachronic perspective, the historical method was employed. This method made it possible to examine the main political, social, cultural, and demographic factors that, at various historical stages, contributed to the

consolidation and expansion of the use of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, the application of the historical method facilitated the analysis of specific conditions and structural transformations that occurred in the region and influenced the dynamics of the status and functions of the Russian language in the public and institutional spheres.

The method of analysis and deduction was used to examine the key aspects related to the legal, social, and functional status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova, allowing for the formulation of generalized conclusions based on a critical interpretation of empirical data and the existing normative framework. In addition, the research involved the use of the webographic method, which provided the opportunity to investigate the subject both at the theoretical and practical levels through the analysis of key sources available on official and academic online platforms. This method contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue under investigation by valorizing relevant documents, specialized studies, and institutional reports.

The analysis of statistical data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics, particularly those related to the population censuses conducted in 2004, 2014, and 2024, was carried out by combining the webographic method with the comparative method. This approach enabled the identification of trends and changes in the linguistic structure of the population, as well as the assessment of the evolution of the role of the Russian language within the demographic and sociolinguistic context. At the same time, the phenomenological method facilitated the analysis of the Russian language as a socio-cultural and identity-related phenomenon in the Republic of Moldova, highlighting its symbolic, functional, and perceptual dimensions within collective consciousness. The application of this method made it possible to capture the ways in which the Russian language is experienced, interpreted, and integrated into contemporary social realities, beyond a strictly normative or statistical framework.

The historical context of the evolution of the Russian language in the region

For a better understanding of the presence of the Russian language in the South-Eastern European region, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of its historical evolution and influence in this geopolitical and cultural space. Today, more than ten centuries after the first records of the presence of Russians (in the 12th-13th centuries, the Eastern Slavs began to divide and individualize themselves: *Great Russians/Muscovites, Whites, Little Russians, Red Russians-Червонная*) east of the Carpathians before the

ancestors of the Moldovans from Maramureș moved to this region, the issue of the status of the Russian language becomes a rather sensitive topic.

The Russian language penetrated various territories in different historical contexts, often associated with processes of political and administrative expansion, as well as economic and cultural exchanges. Important landmarks regarding the presence of the Russian language in the region are provided by Romanian historian Dimitrie Onciu. Thus, basing his research on toponymic data, he notes: “At the time of the taking into possession (11th-12th centuries) of the east-Carpathian territory, *the Vlachs* found here the Slavs, from whom the Slavic names of localities and rivers were taken over; D. Onciul attests to the presence of Russian communities in northern Moldova. The old Slavic population, strengthened by Russian emigration, must have been maintained” (*From the History of Bukovina*, 1891) (Onciul, 2010). This evidence suggests that the presence of Eastern Slavs, later identified as Russians, had a significant continuity in northern Moldavia, influencing the demographic structure and toponymy of the region.

A broader characterization of the presence of Russians and Eastern Slavs in the region is also provided by Eustratie Logofătul (?–1646) in *the Annals of Stephen the Great's Court* (lost) - the first work dedicated to Moldovan history, written in Slavonic, was the source and model for the following Moldovan-Slavonic chronicles written up to *Azarie's Chronicle*. Although Eustratie's basic work on the history of Moldovan written culture, the *Moldavian Chronicle*, has been lost (*Letopesețele despre începuturile Statului Moldovenesc*), posterity has evidence and testimonies proving the presence of Russians. This reality is confirmed by documents from the Moldavian princely chancellery from the early 15th century. The trade privilege granted by the Moldavian ruler, Alexander the Good, reflects the economic and ethnic realities of the Eastern Carpathian region in the first half of the 15th century. The text of the document explicitly states that it is granted to “merchants from all over the Land of Russia,” an expression that, in the context of the time, refers to the territories of southwestern Russia. This wording indicates the existence of strong trade links between Moldavia and the areas inhabited by the Eastern Slavs, as well as official recognition of the role played by Ruthenian merchants in regional economic exchanges. Through this privilege, the Moldavian ruler sought to stimulate trade, ensure the safety of foreign merchants on Moldavian territory, and integrate the country into the commercial networks of Central and Eastern Europe.

The importance and extent of this presence are also confirmed by subsequent developments. The number of Russians in northern Moldavia was so large that, during the reign of Stephen III the Great, in Suceava, the capital of Moldavia, there was an entire neighborhood inhabited by

Russians, mainly merchants and craftsmen (Исторические связи народов). This reality demonstrates the multicultural character of medieval Moldovan cities and the integration of Ruthenian communities into the economic and urban life of the Moldovan state.

The presence of Eastern Slavs in medieval Moldavia is well documented by historical sources, demonstrating both their demographic size and their cultural and linguistic influence. Following the campaign against the Polish Land (June 1498), chroniclers mention that “many people, men, women, and children were taken away, more than 100,000, many of whom settled under the rule of Stephen the Great in his country, so that to this day the Russian language lives in Moldavia, where he took up residence, and a third of the population speaks Russian” (Ureche, 1958). This reality was confirmed two centuries later, at the end of the 17th century, by Simion Dascălul, who in his supplement to Grigore Ureche’s Chronicle noted that “to this day, this country (Moldavia) is home to half of the Russians” (Ureche, 1958).

The presence and influence of the Slavs extended south of the Carpathians. The Wallachian chronicler C. Cantacuzino (the steward), in his work *Istoria a Țării Rumânești (History of Wallachia)*, completed around 1716, notes that the Vlachs/Muntenians traditionally used “the Russian and Slovenian languages” due to their proximity and mixing with their Slavic-speaking neighbors (*Istoria Țării Rumânești*). In the same vein, Dimitrie Cantemir, in *his Chronicle*, recalls that “the old Moldavian Chronicle (Letopisețul Moldovenesc by Eustratie Logofătul, used by Gr. Ureche) mentions the presence of Russians who lived in Suceava and Baia (Civitas Moldaviae) before the arrival of Dragoș Vodă from Transylvania” (Cantemir, 1717). Dimitrie Cantemir completes the cultural-linguistic picture with observations on local vocabulary and titles: words of Slavonic origin, such as “boeri” (from the Slavonic “boyare”), were used to designate local nobles, and in regions close to Poland, the inhabitants routinely spoke Ruthenian and Polish (*ibidem*). At the same time, the presence of Slavonic words in toponyms, administration, and everyday life highlights the lasting impact of Russian and Ruthenian communities on the social and cultural structure of medieval Moldova (Cantemir, 1717: 113). Thus, chronicles and documents from that period show that Moldova and Wallachia were multi-ethnic and multicultural territories, where Slavic influences were reflected in trade, language, customs, and social organization, confirming the existence of a consistent Russian presence from northern Moldova to the vicinity of Muntenia.

A detailed description of the situation regarding the penetration of the Russian/Slavonic language into the region, especially into the Romanian space, is provided by D. Cantemir in Chapter V of his “Description of Moldova.” According to him, until the Council of Florence, Moldovans,

following the example of other peoples who had formed their languages from the basic Latin, used Latin letters. However, during the reign of Alexander the Good, the Metropolitan of Moldova, Teoctist, a Bulgarian by birth and deacon of Mark of Ephesus, intervened to limit Latin influences in the Moldovan church. In order to “remove any trace of Latinism” and prevent young people from picking up Latin sophistry, Teoctist advised the prince that Latin letters should be banished and replaced with Slavonic ones (Cantemir, 1717: 203). As a result, for two centuries, the only language used in princely correspondence, treasury records, and all official writings from the court was Slavonic (Cantemir, 1717: 203). This language policy also influenced the education of the boyars: their sons were not taught other languages, only Slavonic, thus consolidating its use in administration, the church, and culture. Thus, according to Cantemir’s testimony, the penetration of the Slavonic/Russian language into Moldavia was not only a phenomenon of trade or migration, but also a deliberate policy of religious and state institutions, aimed at shaping the official language and controlling access to culture and education. “Following the collapse of the Slavic states under the Turks, monks such as Nicodim and others, in order to save the cultural treasures of their people from disaster... brought the old Slavonic manuscripts to our countries and laid the foundation for monastic life according to the rules established on Mount Athos.” In the monasteries they founded and expanded through their care for the spiritual well-being of our voivodes, a fruitful activity began in the Slavonic language, which was then the language of culture of our people (Cartoian, 1996:56). Already in the 14th-15th and 16th centuries... Slavonic culture, continuously strengthened by the centers south of the Danube, was flourishing. Likewise, during the time of Stephen the Great, Slavonic religious culture was satisfactory for Moldova (Cartoian, 1996: 57).

These historical sources indicate that the presence and use of the Russian language in Moldova and Wallachia was a long-lasting phenomenon, the result of both migrations and deportations, as well as neighborly relations with Slavic populations. Contemporary studies on cultural and linguistic contacts in the Eastern Carpathian region confirm the persistence of this influence over several centuries. Russian military campaigns against the Ottoman Empire played a notable role in shaping political developments in the Moldavian region. These operations contributed to diminishing the economic and political control exercised by the Ottoman Empire over Moldova, creating a regional context more favorable to local autonomy. At the same time, the intensification of contacts between the Moldovan and Russian populations facilitated processes of cultural circulation and mutual influence, which led to a noticeable revitalization of social and cultural life in the country. The period 1768-1812, marked by three Russian-Turkish wars and long periods of Russian

military and civil administration in Moldova, represents a stage of profound transformations in the political and cultural evolution of the principality. N. Iorga emphasized that, during this period, Moldova “lived half of its life almost under the rule of Divans led and controlled by Russian commanders, under the influence of the ideas and sentiments that guided Russia at the time.” As a result, the historian noted that, for about two decades, Moldova was de facto integrated into a state structure whose political organization and cultural orientation were profoundly European (Iorga, 1929).

Russian administrative and military influence was not limited to the political sphere, but also created a favorable environment for the penetration of Enlightenment and democratic ideas inspired by the Great French Revolution (1789-1794) into Moldovan society. This intellectual environment, stimulated by the presence of Russian officers and officials, also had an impact on the evolution of the Romanian language, especially in terms of terminology. S. Berejan and V. Bahnari (Бережан) show that the beginning of the 19th century was characterized by a considerable number of lexical borrowings ... conveyed through the Russian language. The two linguists explain the process of penetration and consolidation of the influence of the Russian language and culture in the Moldovan space through two major conditions: the removal of the Phanariot regime in 1821 and the growth of the political influence of the Russian Empire, both on the international scene and in the Balkan region. To reinforce their argument, the authors also highlight the positive contribution of Russian troops stationed in Moldova. Between 1828 and 1834, the Russian army present in the Principalities included numerous officers and soldiers who, according to Mihail Kogălniceanu, played an essential role in transmitting modern knowledge and ideas. Their presence helped overcome the prejudices that isolated Moldova from European civilization and stimulated contact with the liberal ideas of the West, thus contributing to the partial modernization of local institutions and mentalities.

The conclusion of the Peace of Iași in 1792, following the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-1791, gave a significant boost to relations between Moldovans and Russians, while also creating a need for the inhabitants of Moldova to learn Russian. In response to this need, as early as 1789, the first textbooks for learning Russian began to appear in M. Strelbițkii's printing house in Dubăsari. These included: *Букварь, Ынченере де ынвэцэтурэ челор че вор сэ ынвэце карте ку слове словенешть, Дикционарул Ын скуртэ адунаре а нумелор ... ынтру фолосул челор че вор вре а ынвэца лимба русаскэ ши молдовеняскэ* and *the Conversation Manual De ale casiy voarbe, ruséşt și moldoveneşte cu pricinioase complementur*. These works aimed to facilitate the learning of Russian by Moldovans, laying the foundations for a process of bilingual literacy and

cultural integration, thus reflecting Russia's political and military impact in the region, but also the practical need for communication in commercial and administrative contexts. They also demonstrate how Russian influence penetrated not only state institutions and the church, but also the daily lives of the inhabitants, paving the way for closer cultural and political relations in the following decades.

Following the Peace Treaty of May 28, 1812 (Mischevca), Tsarist Russia occupied Bessarabia, marking a major change in the political and administrative configuration of the region. The Russian occupation had profound implications for economic, social, and cultural life, gradually imposing the Russian language in administration and state institutions, while also influencing the educational system and commercial relations of the inhabitants (Vasilos). This situation also favored the strengthening of cultural and linguistic contacts between the local population and Russian communities, thus continuing the processes of integration and influence that had begun in previous centuries. More than two centuries after the signing of the Treaty, the effects of this decision continue to influence society, divided by the border on the Prut River, including from a linguistic point of view (28 mai 1812).

The Russian language was not only known in the Principality of Moldavia, still under Ottoman suzerainty, but was perceived as a necessary tool for the continuity and preservation of the Moldavian cultural treasure, formed in previous centuries in the Slavonic language tradition. In this context, knowledge of Russian was seen as a way to counteract the intense influence of Phanariot Greek and to maintain links with certain strands of European spirituality.

In this regard, a pioneering role was played by Gheorghe Asachi, considered the first Moldovan scholar to understand the importance of studying Russian for broadening the cultural horizons of Moldovan youth and who believed that access to Russian could facilitate closer ties with modern ideas and European cultural circles. By promoting the study of Russian, Asachi sought not only to provide young people with practical training in communicating with Russian-influenced administrative and commercial circles, but also to transmit the cultural, scientific, and literary values that circulated in the Slavic-speaking world, thus contributing to the gradual modernization of Moldovan society.

Russian was included in the curriculum of the Mihailene Academy in Iași, an institution founded in 1835 and considered one of the first modern higher education institutions in Romania. Among the Russian language teachers at this academy was Vasile Pelteki, an active figure in the cultural milieu of Iași in the first half of the 19th century. In 1831, he published in

Iași an “*Абецедарю русо-ромынск*”, a textbook for learning Russian with application in the Romanian space. Vasile Pelteki also made literary translations from Russian into Moldovan, among which the translation of the poem *Ермак, cuceritorul Siberiei* (Yermak, Conqueror of Siberia) stands out. This activity is mentioned by N. Corlăteanu in his study *Studiu asupra sistemii lexicale moldovenești* (Study on the Moldovan Lexical System), where he highlights the contribution of Moldovan translators to the circulation of Russian texts and cultural influences in the local milieu (Corlăteanu, 1964).

A significant impact on the expansion of the use of Russian in the Moldovan SSR was the decision to Russify educational institutions, adopted immediately after the occupation of Bessarabia by the Soviet army. The legislative basis for these policies was established by the Decision of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR of March 13, 1938, “*On the compulsory study of the Russian language in the schools of the union republics.*” On the basis of this normative act, on August 12, 1940, the leadership of the Moldovan SSR issued a similar decision aimed at the compulsory implementation of the Russian language in the education system (Șevcenco, 2019: 440).

The second stage of language policy in the Moldavian SSR took place between 1946 and 1950. Starting in 1946, the authorities in Moscow tightened measures to combat “manifestations of bourgeois nationalism,” which led to the consolidation of the status of the Russian language in public and cultural life. Its role was reinforced by intellectuals loyal to Soviet directives, including officials and specialists of Russian origin or educated in a Russian-speaking environment. Between 1946 and 1948, linguists in the republic were asked to publish studies on the history of the language and to compile Russian-Romanian dictionaries that reflected Soviet linguistic realities. The first dictionary of this type, which included a considerable number of Russian-origin neologisms used mainly on the left bank of the Dniester, was published in 1949 and contained approximately 140,000 lexical units (Șevcenco, 2019: 440).

The process of Russification continued with the expansion of the circulation of newspapers and magazines published in Russian, a measure officially justified by the need to respond to “readers’ demands.” Although occasionally there were voices in favor of studying the Romanian language (such as that expressed by F. Brovko), many representatives of the republic’s intelligentsia advocated for maintaining and consolidating the status of the Russian language, a notable example being the academician A. Dimo. Another instrument of Russification was cinema. Of the total of 544 films screened in the Moldovan SSR, only 71 were dubbed into Romanian, at a

time when subtitling was not used and the majority of the local population did not know Russian (Șevcenco, 2019: 442).

The language policy of the post-Stalinist period (1953–1959) was characterized by contradictory trends. On the one hand, the coercive methods of previous regimes persisted, favoring the imposition of Russian on both the native population and newcomers. On the other hand, under Khrushchev's leadership, Russification measures intensified, including the abolition of Romanian-language newspapers in localities where the Russian-speaking population was predominant. In accordance with Resolution of the USSR Council of Ministers No. 3947-P of 9 May 1955, pupils in primary, seven-year, and secondary schools in the union republics (with the exception of the RSFSR) were exempted from studying the language of the native population if it was not their mother tongue. At the same time, bilingual television broadcasting was made compulsory, with equal distribution of airtime, based on complaints from the Russian-speaking population (Șevcenco, 2019).

A central figure in promoting Russification policies was E. Postovoi, who, after taking over as CC secretary for ideology in 1960, consistently supported this direction. At the 4th Plenary Session of the Central Committee on April 26, 1960, the Resolution "*On the state and measures to improve the teaching of Russian in general schools of the republic*" was adopted, a document that further strengthened the position of Russian in the Moldavian SSR. At the union conference of linguists in Alma-Ata (November 1962), despite some divergent opinions expressed by specialists, A. Borșevici categorically stated that, for "the majority of nations and peoples of the Soviet Union, the functions of the Russian language are more important than those of the mother tongue." These linguistic changes were also favored by the structure of the administrative apparatus, dominated by allolingual bureaucrats, especially Russians, who occupied privileged positions in the state hierarchy. At the same time, efforts were intensified to expand the use of Russian in Romanian-language schools (Șevcenco, 2019: 445).

On October 13, 1978, the Council of Ministers of the USSR adopted a resolution on measures for the continuous improvement of Russian language teaching in the union republics. In accordance with these directives, on December 7, 1978, the CC Bureau of the CPM discussed the issue of improving the process of teaching Russian in the Moldavian SSR. The decision adopted required the relevant ministries to optimize the quality of textbooks, raise their ideological, theoretical, and scientific level, develop new teaching programs, and expand the activities of scientific circles focused on Russian language and literature.

Starting in 1979, the Ministry of Education initiated the publication of the magazine *Russian Language in Moldovan Schools*, considered by the authorities to be an essential tool of educational policy. In August 1980, responsibility for publishing the magazine was transferred to the Partisan Publishing House of the CC of the CPM, a sign of the strengthening of ideological control over its content. At the same time, the Moscow leadership imposed on the union republics the obligation to organize courses for improving Russian language skills, as well as the complete transition of teaching the subject “Primary Military Training” into Russian. During this period, reports on the progress of Russian language teaching in the districts of the Moldavian SSR became more frequent.

The CC of the CPM also intervened in other areas, including language training for recruits (meeting of April 27, 1982) and the promotion of Russian as the main means of interethnic communication. In 1983, the CC of the CPSU adopted a resolution on “creating conditions for facilitating the study of Russian by the population of the union republics,” which was presented by the first secretary of the CC of the CPM, S. Grossu, at the 10th Plenary Session of the CC of the CPM of the MSSR (June 5, 1983). To implement these directives, on June 28, 1983, the CC Bureau of the CPM adopted the Resolution “On additional measures to improve the study of Russian in general schools and other educational institutions.” The document provided for the continuous improvement of school curricula, the creation of two-year courses for learning Russian at pedagogical institutions, and the expansion of Russian language departments at specialized research institutes. Between 1984 and 1990, there were plans to publish an increased number of methodological works, dictionaries, and other publications in Russian. Despite the fact that the indigenous population of the Moldavian SSR represented approximately 64% of the total, the proportion of radio and television broadcasts in Romanian was only 36%, highlighting the profound imbalance in the official language policy of the era (Şevcenco, 2019: 452).

In January 1989, the Commission for the Drafting of Laws of the Moldavian SSR on “Issues of the Use of Moldavian, Russian, and Other Languages in the Territory of the Moldavian SSR” was established, headed by N. Platon. On January 24, 1989, the CC Bureau adopted a decision to initiate the drafting of republican laws on the functioning of languages on the territory of the Moldavian SSR. In this context, on May 17, 1989, the CC Bureau approved, among other things, the draft law on the transition to the Latin alphabet, marking a significant moment in the republic’s language policy (Şevcenco, 2019: 441).

In the Moldavian SSR, the language issue in the context created by Perestroika and Glasnost gained momentum and intensity. After Mikhail Gorbachev announced his reforms on May 26, 1987, the Central Committee

of the Communist Party of Moldova and the Council of Ministers of the Moldavian SSR approved two resolutions: “On improving the teaching of the Moldovan language in the republic” and “On improving the teaching of the Russian language in the Moldavian SSR.” Point 2 of the 11 May 1988 resolution of the Central Committee’s Departments of Science and Educational Institutions, Propaganda and Agitation, and Culture specified the need to oblige public institutions at the local, district, and republican levels to ensure a bilingual policy by creating favorable conditions for learning the Moldavian language and, equally, the Russian language in the republic. It also required that the principle of using both the national language and Russian be observed in the socio-political and socio-economic spheres of Soviet Moldova (Chestiunea limbii de stat în RSS Moldovenească).

In the second half of the 1980s, with the relaxation of the Soviet regime and the emergence of glasnost and perestroika policies, a strong national revival movement began to take shape in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR), in which the Romanian language became not only a cultural element but also a symbol of collective identity. During this period, the majority Romanian-speaking population, marginalized in previous decades by Soviet language policy and the exclusive use of the Cyrillic alphabet for the “Moldovan language,” mobilized its forces for the recognition of its mother tongue in official and educational life. The defining moment of this revival was 1989, when, on August 27, 1991, in the Great National Assembly Square in Chișinău, approximately 700,000–750,000 people participated in a historic demonstration for the declaration of Romanian as the state language and for the return to the Latin alphabet. Public pressure led to the adoption, on August 31, 1989, of the law declaring the “Moldovan” language written with the Latin alphabet as the state language of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, and the Cyrillic alphabet was abandoned. The same act emphasized the common linguistic identity with the Romanian language, a fact also recognized by numerous linguists. After the Declaration of Independence on August 27, 1991 (*Lege privind Declarația de independență a Republicii Moldova*), Romanian was reaffirmed as the official language of the newly formed state. On September 1, 1989, Law No. 3465 on the functioning of languages spoken on the territory of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (*Republica Moldova. Parlamentul . Lege Nr. 3465*) was adopted, which provides in its preamble, among other things, that the Russian language will be provided, on the territory of this Republic, the necessary conditions for its use and development as a language of communication between the nations of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Furthermore, Article 10 of this Law states that the acts of state authorities, state administration, and public organizations must be translated into Russian (*Lege Nr. 3465*). The adoption in 1989 of laws on the status of the state language and its return to the Latin alphabet (*Республика*

Молдова. Верховный Совет Советской Социалистической Республики Молдова. Закон № 3462) was a first step towards asserting the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova (31 august).

Since language is not only a means of communication but also an essential element of cultural and political identity, this discussion in the Republic of Moldova is influenced both by the historical legacy of the Soviet period and by social and political developments since independence.

The legislative framework of the status of the Russian language

According to the provisions of Article 13 of the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, entitled State Language, the functioning of other languages stipulates the following: (1) The state language of the Republic of Moldova is Romanian, functioning on the basis of the Latin alphabet. (2) The state recognizes and protects the right to preserve, develop, and use Russian and other languages spoken in the country. (3) The state facilitates the study of languages of international circulation. (4) The functioning of languages on the territory of the Republic of Moldova shall be established by organic law (Constituția Republicii Moldova). Thus, at present, Russian does not have a special status, unlike Romanian (the official language), and its mention in the constitution is illustrative, as are other languages spoken in the country, such as Ukrainian or Gagauz.

On December 16, 2020, Parliament adopted the Law on the Functioning of Languages Spoken on the Territory of the Republic of Moldova (Legea Nr. 234 din 16-12-2020 cu privire la funcționarea limbilor vorbite pe teritoriul Republicii Moldova). This law emphasised the dominant role of the Russian language throughout the territory of the Republic of Moldova in relation to the languages of other ethnic minorities, without distinguishing between districts where its share is insignificant and districts where its share is significant, in order to establish such strict legal obligations. At the same time, it gave Russian a status similar to that of Romanian. According to the approved draft law, the Republic of Moldova must ensure the necessary conditions for the use and development of Russian as a “language of interethnic communication” in the Republic of Moldova. In this capacity, Russian is to be used on the territory of the Republic of Moldova alongside the state language. Secretariat activities in state and public administration bodies will be carried out in the state language (Moldovan). Upon request, translation into Russian will be provided. Official documents of state authorities and public administration bodies will be drafted and adopted in the state language, to be translated into Russian, and in the Gagauz Autonomous Territorial Union they will also be translated into Gagauz. The bill was voted on by deputies from the Party

of Socialists (PSRM) and those from the “For Moldova” Platform, which includes deputies from the Shor Party. The opposition, however, considered this law to be very sensitive, capable of reigniting social tensions. During the vote, opposition MPs left the session, denouncing a “toxic agenda.” “There are clear elements of federalization.” Several controversial bills were on the agenda of the Moldovan Parliament on Wednesday, including one on the status of Gagauzia and another that would grant Taraclia the status of an “ethnocultural district.” Political analysts point out that the vote on these bills is taking place against the backdrop of a PSRM comeback after losing the presidential election, won by pro-European Maia Sandu, but also of the weakening of state institutions. “These initiatives are designed to be time bombs. They are clear elements of federalization, carried out surreptitiously and hastily by a political force that is openly committed to serving another country. And all this is happening, unfortunately, against a backdrop of minimal resistance from a very weakened system that is in some places non-existent or even complicit. We are talking here about the judicial system, with the possible exception of the Constitutional Court, the special services, and other mechanisms,” political analyst Vlad Țurcanu told Radio Chișinău (*Lege controversată*).

At the beginning of 2021, the Constitutional Court declared this law unconstitutional. The preferential treatment of the Russian language compared to other ethnic minority languages, by positioning it at the level of the state language, contravenes the Constitution, which recognizes only one state language and does not contain the phrase “language of interethnic communication” (Agora, 2022). This is the Law on the Functioning of Languages Spoken on the Territory of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, a state entity that has not existed *de facto* for over three decades.

This law was passed in parliament without an opinion from the government, without a debate as required by legislative regulations, without consultation with civil society, and even without a debate in the Moldovan Academy and the scientific community. In fact, the language issue is a highly debated topic in the Republic of Moldova and has helped parties on the left, but also on the right, to gain political capital. However, the Constitutional Court rejected other points in the complaint signed by Liberal Party MPs, who believe that the state's guarantee of the right to education in Russian, as well as the translation of public documents and acts into this language, would contravene the Constitution. The Court found that the status of Romanian as the state language is not threatened, as the liberals claim. The Court also emphasized the importance of complying with the provisions of international conventions on the protection of national and linguistic minorities (Ceapai). The Constitutional Court was notified by opposition MPs

Dinu Plîngău, Maria Ciobanu, and Octavian Țicu, who argued that the law should be declared unconstitutional (Bezer).

Of course, the Russian Embassy in Chișinău was quick to react to the Constitutional Court's decision, expressing its offense and alarm at this decision. Similarly, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said it was a "regrettable" decision. Moreover, she stated that the decision contradicts the electoral promises of President Maia Sandu and emphasized that the Republic of Moldova is a multinational state in which 80% of citizens speak Russian, which is untrue. It is true, however, that a large part of the population of the Republic of Moldova knows Russian at a conversational level, but let us not forget that Moldovan citizens born after the 1990s were not so motivated to learn Russian, especially those in rural areas. Yes, those born in the Soviet Union were forced to learn it, but now, for those who do not know it, Russian is taught in high schools in the Republic of Moldova as a foreign language for only three years. In addition to this administrative issue, most Moldovan citizens, who are Romanian speakers (80 percent of the country's population), would have felt discriminated against. If Russian had been declared a language of interethnic communication alongside Romanian, then Russian speakers would never have been motivated to learn the state language, Romanian, and perhaps the Romanian language baccalaureate would no longer be compulsory for all students in Moldova. This decision would have triggered a chain reaction of more and more legislative quibbles, which would not have been tolerated by the majority of the population (Pleșca, 2021).

In the Republic of Moldova, the Constitutional Court upheld the complaint challenging the law on the use of languages spoken in the country, which gave special status to the Russian language. The decision is final and cannot be appealed. The law granting privileged status to the Russian language was challenged in the Constitutional Court by several pro-European MPs who argue that its provisions violate the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova. The court ruled that the special status granted to Russian in the contested law is unconstitutional and that this provision discriminates against the languages spoken by representatives of other ethnic minorities in Moldova, such as Ukrainian, Gagauz, and Bulgarian (Curtea Constituțională).

The Court referred to the Constitution, according to which the state language of the Republic of Moldova is Romanian, and the state recognizes the right to preserve and use Russian and other languages on the territory of the country. The President of the Court, Domnica Manole, explained that the legislative act conferred special status on the Russian language among ethnic minorities, a status that does not derive from the Constitution (Lepădatu).

Furthermore, “Law No. 3465 of 01.09.1989 on the functioning of languages spoken on the territory of the Moldovan SSR” cannot be considered constitutional in the first place because neither the Moldovan SSR nor the USSR exist as state entities anymore. The priority given to the Russian language is conditioned by the fact that at that time Russian was the language of communication throughout the USSR, of which the Moldavian SSR was a part, which is why the law stipulates that “the Moldavian SSR shall ensure the necessary conditions on its territory for the use and development of Russian as the language of communication between the nations of the USSR, as well as the languages of other nationalities living in the republic.” In general, the document regulates in great detail the status of the Russian and Gagauz languages, which are mentioned more frequently than the Moldovan language or the state language (Condrea).

Russian in public and media spaces

The websites of state institutions in the Republic of Moldova, which indicate the languages in which information is presented, currently display the search icons for RO, RU, EN, i.e. Romanian, Russian, English (or in a different order – RO, EN, RU). Thus, the State Chancellery displays Romanian, English, Русский; Republic of Moldova. Official website –RO, RU, EN; Government of the Republic of Moldova – RO, EN, RU; Ministry of Health, Ministry of Information Technology and Communications, National Bank of Moldova - ro, en, ru. The Ministry of Education changes the order slightly, displaying RO, RU, EN; the Ministry of Justice proposes RO, RU; the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives “Viitorul” (IDIS) - Romanian, English; the State Information Agency “Moldpress” - ro, en, ru; Court of Auditors of the Republic of Moldova – Romanian, English, Русский; Moldovan Post - rom, eng, ru; Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova - eng, rom, rus. Even the official website of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia www.gagauzia.md offers search options in RU, RO, EN, but does not have texts in the Gagauz language, as would be expected (ibidem). However, even at the level of society, in the business environment, in partnership relations, etc., the term “Moldovan language” practically no longer appears. For example, in job offers posted on the Internet, when language requirements are announced, only Romanian is mentioned, not Moldovan. For example, for the position of auto parts salesperson, the basic requirements include knowledge of Romanian and Russian; those wishing to work as waiters/waitresses, sales agents, managers, company representatives, etc., must know Romanian, Russian, and English in some cases. Advertisements written in Russian contain the same requirements: sales manager, with knowledge of computers, Russian, and Romanian. <http://lucru.md/> Various companies with official websites also provide information in Romanian, not Moldovan: “Franzeļuța” JSC - en, ro, ru; the

Moldovan Railways – Ru, Ro; the MallDova shopping center – RO, RU, EN, and the list of examples goes on (ibidem).

An analysis of the presence of Russian in the media space of the Republic of Moldova shows that two-thirds of television media services retransmitted in the country but not under state jurisdiction broadcast content entirely or partially in Russian. These data are recorded in the study “*The media market in the Republic of Moldova: realities and trends in 2025*,” published by the Independent Journalism Center (IJC) in July 2025. According to expert Ion Bunduchi, co-author of the research, the situation signals a marginalisation of the official language in programming schedules, which is considered worrying in the context of policies to strengthen national linguistic identity.

According to the study, 408 television media services under foreign jurisdiction are retransmitted in the Republic of Moldova, covering generalist, news, or thematic content (film, music, children, sports). Of these, 67% broadcast entirely or partially in Russian. In total, the retransmitted stations use 12 languages, but Russian predominates, being present in the schedules of 261 of the 389 channels analyzed according to the language of broadcast. The retransmitted media services come from 20 countries and are accessible via cable and IPTV networks. The geographical distribution shows that 186 channels (45.5%) are from the Russian Federation, 87 (21.3%) from Romania, 21 from the United Kingdom, 20 from the Netherlands, and 19 from Ukraine, with the remaining 75 channels coming from the US, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Turkey, Germany, Austria, Ireland, France, Italy, Spain, Serbia, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. In addition, 19 channels broadcast content in several languages, including Turkish, Czech, German, Arabic, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Russian, and in 10 of these, Russian is combined with other languages, forming complex multilingual structures.

Expert Ion Bunduchi emphasizes that these data should be analyzed in the context of social integration and cultural segregation processes. Most of the retransmitted services use Russian as their main language, which, according to the authors of the study, creates an unnatural situation from the perspective of promoting the official language of the state. Linguistic diversity is not a problem in itself, as it can facilitate the learning of other languages and openness to different cultural perspectives. However, the excessive dominance of a single language, combined with the marginalization of the official language, can contribute to the consolidation of an illusory perception of general linguistic competence and the creation of monolingual or bilingual information bubbles, with an impact on social cohesion and identity (Ciobanu).

Geopolitical reconfigurations and implications for linguistic perceptions

According to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Moldova, in the 2014 census, 11.1% of the population indicated Russian as their mother tongue. According to census data, the number of Russian speakers could be estimated, given that Russian has a higher share in the north of the country (13.0%) and in urban areas. Russian has a more significant share in the northern regions of the country (13.0%) and in urban areas. The data presented was collected during the 2014 census. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on the structure of the population by language spoken, Romanian is the native language of at least 78.6% of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova. Among the languages of ethnic minorities, Russian is the most widely spoken. Therefore, Russian is spoken by 14.5% of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, with a distribution throughout the country, being the mother tongue of 21.8% of citizens. The legislation of the Republic of Moldova is among the few that offers legal guarantees to minority languages for their use in several areas of society. It stipulates that "persons belonging to national minorities have the right to freely use their mother tongue, both in writing and orally, to have access to information in that language, to disseminate it and to exchange information." In the territory of the Gagauzia Administrative-Territorial Unit, trilingualism is practiced in accordance with the law. Gagauz, Moldovan, and Russian are declared official languages. However, de facto, the territory of the autonomy is a territory of bilingualism, with only Russian and Gagauz being used for the most part. More the, this reality highlights a stark contrast between ethnic composition and spoken language. Currently, Russian remains the language of interethnic communication here in southern Moldova, a situation that stems from the past (Sacul lingvistic al Republicii Moldova). The percentage of the population of Moldova who declared Romanian as their mother tongue in last summer's census increased by 8.1% compared to the 2014 census, while the share of those who indicated "Moldovan" decreased by 7.8%, according to data published by the National Bureau of Statistics in Chișinău.

The census also revealed changes in the ethnic structure of the population: the proportion of people who identify themselves as Moldovans reached 77.2%, compared to 75.3% a decade ago. At the same time, the number of those who declared themselves Gagauz, Ukrainian, and Russian decreased. Thus, according to the results of the census conducted between April 8 and July 7, 2024, the Republic of Moldova lost almost 14% of its population in 10 years. The population with habitual residence in the Republic of Moldova is 2,401,000, while the 2014 census recorded

2,789,000 inhabitants. Over 49% of those interviewed in the 2024 census stated that their mother tongue is “Moldovan.” In comparison, in the 2014 census, almost 57% indicated “Moldovan” as their mother tongue. At the same time, in 2024, more than 31% indicated Romanian as their mother tongue, while in 2014 the proportion was 23.2%. Also, 11.1% of the population indicated Russian as their mother tongue in 2024. In the 2014 census, unlike the 2024 census, 9.9% of the population indicated Russian as their mother tongue. The institution added that Russian has a more significant share in the north of the country (13.0%) and in urban areas in all regions (*ibidem*). The census also revealed changes in the ethnic structure of the population: the number of people who identified themselves as Moldovans increased to 77.2%. In 2014, the proportion was 75.3%. Romanians declared themselves to be 7.9%, while in 2014 they were 6.7%. Russians declared themselves to be 3.2%, in 2014 – 4.1% (Groza).

According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the final results of the 2024 Population and Housing Census (PHC) on the ethnocultural characteristics of the population with usual residence on the census reference date (April 8, 2024). According to the 2024 population census data, 99.9% of the population declared their mother tongue. Of this total, 79.9% mentioned Romanian or Moldovan (compared to 78.1% in 2014), of which 48.1% declared Moldovan (55.5% in 2014) and 31.8% Romanian (22.6% in 2014). Russian was declared as the mother tongue by 11.6% of the population (compared to 9.6% in 2014). The share of Russian as a commonly spoken language is higher, reaching 15.9%, especially in urban areas (26.9%), in the North development region (16.7%), and in the municipality of Bălți (45.0%). In the 2024 Population and Housing Census (RPL), 87.5% of the population reported knowledge of Romanian or Moldovan (54.5% Moldovan and 39.0% Romanian). At the same time, 68.2% of the population stated that they knew Russian, and 13.4% knew English. Of the total population with usual residence of 2,409,200 people, 99.9% declared their ethnic affiliation. The largest proportion was represented by Moldovans, 1,848,600 persons (76.7%), followed by Romanians, 193,200 persons (8.0%) (Groza) (see Annex No. 1).

Compared to the 2014 census, the 2024 census showed an increase in the proportion of the population identifying as Moldovan (from 74.0% to 76.7%). The proportion of Russians decreased from 4.1% to 3.4%. In territorial terms, the distribution of the population by ethnicity in the 2024 census retains the configuration of previous censuses (in 2004 and 2014), but the number of people and the share of each ethnicity have undergone some changes. The Russian ethnic population, concentrated mainly in urban areas, has a higher share in the municipalities of Bălți (10.1%) and Chișinău (5.9%), as well as in the districts of Basarabeasca (7.5%) and

Dondușeni (5.2%) (Rezultatele finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024).

Of the total of 897 towns (municipalities) and villages (communes) surveyed, in 805 of them the majority of the population declared themselves to be of Moldovan ethnicity, of which in 524 the proportion was over 90%. The highest proportion (over 30%) of people declaring themselves to be of Romanian ethnicity was in the villages (communes) of Negrești in the district of Strășeni, Feștelîța in the district of Ștefan Vodă, Zgârdești in the Telenești district, Hansca in the Ialoveni district, Camenca in the Glodeni district, Tuzara in the Călărași district, Orac in the Leova district, Drăsliceni in the Criuleni district, and Opaci in the Căușeni district.

According to census data, ethnic Russians formed the majority of the population in five villages (communes): Pocrovca, Dondușeni district, Cunicea, Florești district, Troițcoe, Cimișlia district, Dobrogea Veche, Sîngerei district, and Semionovca, Ștefan Vodă district. In 15 other towns (municipalities) and villages (communes), between 10% and 32% of the population declared themselves to be Russian. Of the total population of 2,409,200 inhabitants, 191,000 people or 7.9% declared a second ethnicity (collected for the first time in the 2024 census) (Rezultatele finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024). Of the ethnicities declared as a second ethnicity, Russians accounted for 2.2%. Of the total population of 2,409,200 people, 99.9% declared their mother tongue, of which Moldovan was declared by 1,441,400 people (48.1%), Romanian by 765,800 people (31.8%), Russian by 280,000 people (11.6%). Thus, compared to the 2014 census, the share of those who declared *Russian* as their mother tongue increased from 9.6% in 2014 to 11.6% in 2024 (see Annex No. 2) (Rezultatele finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024). In terms of language skills, 87.5% of the population aged 3 years and over declared that they knew Russian (68.2%) and English (13.4%) (ibidem). A comparative analysis between ethnicity and declared mother tongue generally shows a direct correspondence between these two structures, but not entirely. Thus, of those who declared themselves to be ethnic *Moldovans*, 61.7% considered *Moldovan* to be their mother tongue, 31.2% considered *Romanian* to be their mother tongue, and 6.5% considered *Russian* to be their mother tongue. Of those who declared themselves to be ethnic *Romanians*, 95.8% considered *Romanian* to be their mother tongue, 3.3% considered *Moldovan* to be their mother tongue, and 0.7% considered *Russian* to be their mother tongue. However, the relationship between ethnicity and mother tongue differs from one ethnic group to another. Among ethnic *Russians*, 95.2% considered *Russian* to be their mother tongue, 2.6% considered *Moldovan* to be their mother tongue, 0.7% considered *Romanian* and *Ukrainian* to be their mother tongue, and 0.6% considered *Gagauz* to be their mother tongue (Rezultatele

finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024). The most pronounced change can be seen in terms of mother tongue. The number of those who named "Romanian" as their mother tongue increased significantly (Câți români, vorbitori de rusă, atei și musulmani sunt în Moldova).

Conclusions

The status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova is an essential analytical benchmark for understanding the geopolitical and sociocultural transformations that have marked its evolution throughout history and geopolitical changes. The persistence of Russian in the public, institutional, and media spheres reflects the continuity of symbolic and functional structures inherited from the Soviet period, which continue to influence identity dynamics and interethnic relations. Changes in the legislative framework and language policies highlight the fluctuating nature of the status of the Russian language, which is closely linked to the geopolitical reorientations of the political elite and the power relations within society. Thus, the issue of the Russian language transcends the strictly linguistic dimension, becoming an instrument of political mobilization and affirmation of divergent geopolitical options, especially in relation to the European and Eurasian vectors.

From a sociocultural perspective, the continued use of Russian among certain ethnolinguistic communities indicates both the multilingual nature of Moldovan society and the difficulties of consolidating a common civic identity centered on the official language. This reality highlights the need for coherent and inclusive language policies capable of ensuring the integration of national minorities without undermining the role of the Romanian language as the main factor of social and identity cohesion. Thus, the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova functions as a complex indicator of the interaction between historical memory, identity construction, and geopolitical orientation, reflecting the structural tensions and transition processes specific to post-Soviet societies.

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The Identity of Chivalric Orders in Contemporary Europe. A Case Study of the Sovereign Templar Order of Saint Martin

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Abstract

This study explores the processes through which contemporary chivalric orders in Europe reconstruct and project their institutional identity at the intersection of historical legacy, symbolic continuity, and modern forms of cultural diplomacy. Using the Sovereign Templar Order of Saint Martin (OSTSM) as a case study, the article analyses how a neo-chivalric organization articulates Christian ethics, philanthropic action, and intercultural engagement within a framework of symbolic legitimacy and civic responsibility.

The research follows a qualitative, interpretative-constructivist approach, combining historical, theological, legal, and institutional analysis, supported by SWOT and case study methods. The findings indicate that, despite the absence of medieval juridical continuity, contemporary chivalric organizations derive their public legitimacy from symbolic capital, social action, and ethical coherence, allowing them to function as relevant actors of cultural-philanthropic and moral soft power in today's Europe.

Keywords

Chivalric orders, identity, cultural diplomacy, soft power, OSTSM.

1. Introduction and Methodology

Chivalric orders represent one of the most enduring syntheses of faith, honour, devotion, and service to others in the history of European civilization. Emerging at the intersection of Christian ethos and the politico-military realities of the Middle Ages, these institutions underwent, over time, significant transformations, gradually adapting from clearly defined military and religious functions to predominantly moral, educational, and philanthropic roles in the modern era (Riley-Smith 2008, 112–118).

This capacity for adaptation explains both the symbolic continuity of chivalric orders and the persistence of their institutional relevance across profoundly different historical contexts (Barber 1994, 321–327).

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In the twenty-first century, within a European space marked by identity fragmentation, accelerated secularization, and the reconfiguration of spiritual reference points, chivalric orders can no longer be interpreted merely as relics of the past. They increasingly manifest themselves as active symbolic entities that reinterpret tradition in relation to contemporary social needs and new forms of communal solidarity. In this context, these organizations function as points of intersection between Europe's Christian memory and the present-day demands of civic responsibility, intercultural dialogue, and philanthropic engagement (McLeod 2007, 201–209).

The contemporary reinterpretation of chivalry entails a conceptual shift from a military paradigm toward a cultural and symbolic one. From this perspective, chivalry can be understood as a specific form of moral soft power, expressed through transnational networks of philanthropy, civic education, volunteering, and cultural diplomacy. Modern chivalric orders mobilize medieval symbols such as the cross, the oath, and initiation rituals, transforming them into resources of social legitimacy and symbolic capital capable of contributing to European cohesion and to dialogue between religious and cultural traditions (Nye 2004, 5–11).

The purpose of this study is to examine how contemporary chivalric orders construct, preserve, and project their identity within today's European environment through symbolic, philanthropic, and institutional mechanisms, with particular emphasis on the relationship between historical tradition and modern social functions. Within this framework, a case study of the Sovereign Templar Order of Saint Martin is employed to illustrate how a neo-chivalric order inspired by the Templar tradition can operate as a factor of spiritual cohesion, a generator of symbolic capital, and a vector of cultural diplomacy in contemporary Europe.

The research is guided by the general hypothesis that the identity and legitimacy of contemporary chivalric orders are structured primarily through symbolic capital, moral coherence, and social engagement, while the juridical dimension of formal medieval continuity plays a secondary role in processes of public and institutional recognition. This approach is consistent both with sociological theories of symbolic legitimacy (Bourdieu 1991, 163–170) and with recent European scholarship, which emphasizes that the legitimacy of modern chivalric orders is determined more by identity coherence and social functionality than by claims of uninterrupted juridical continuity from the Middle Ages (Heydel-Mankoo 2019, 45–58).

The documentation is based on specialized academic literature from the fields of history, theology, symbolic sociology, and international relations, complemented by legal, canonical, and institutional documents relevant to the case study. From a methodological perspective, the study

adopts a qualitative, interpretative-constructivist approach, combining documentary analysis, discourse analysis, and the exploratory use of the SWOT method in order to identify the main dimensions of potential and vulnerability within the contemporary neo-chivalric phenomenon. The case study of the Sovereign Templar Order of Saint Martin (OSTSM) allows the theoretical framework to be correlated with a concrete institutional example.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The analysis of contemporary chivalric orders is grounded in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework in which contributions from international relations theory, symbolic sociology, cultural diplomacy studies, and historical-theological research converge toward understanding these structures as active symbolic actors in contemporary Europe. The specialized literature indicates that chivalric orders can no longer be interpreted solely through the lens of medieval juridical continuity, but must be analysed as modern institutional forms that produce identity, legitimacy, and collective meaning.

From the perspective of international relations, the constructivist approach provides an essential starting point for analysing the identity of non-state actors. Wendt argues that the identities and interests of actors are the result of social norms and interactions rather than of pre-existing objective data (Wendt 1999). Katzenstein situates this perspective within a cultural framework, showing that norms are internalized within specific collective contexts and shape distinct institutional behaviours (Katzenstein 1996). Bourdieu, in turn, complements this approach by explaining how identities constructed in this way acquire social effectiveness through processes of recognition and the accumulation of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991). Taken together, these contributions make it possible to interpret chivalric orders as structures whose identity is continuously negotiated through norms, practices, and mechanisms of symbolic legitimation.

This symbolic dimension is central to understanding the functioning of contemporary chivalric orders. From a constructivist perspective, symbols contribute to the internalization of norms and to the consolidation of collective belonging (Wendt 1999). At the same time, Bourdieu shows that they operate as resources of symbolic power, generating prestige, authority, and internal cohesion (Bourdieu 1991). In this sense, elements such as the cross, the oath, the mantle, or ceremonial practices are not mere historical remnants, but active instruments in the production of symbolic capital, whose effectiveness depends on collective recognition and on the moral coherence of the institution.

The link between symbol, identity, and influence is further developed in the literature on soft power and cultural diplomacy. Nye defines soft power as the ability to shape preferences and outcomes through attraction, values, and credibility rather than coercion (Nye 2004). Melissen extends this perspective by showing that such influence is increasingly exercised by non-state actors through cultural diplomacy and trust-based relational networks (Melissen 2005). Anholt complements this view by emphasizing the role of moral reputation and image capital in shaping transnational influence (Anholt 2010). Within this theoretical framework, contemporary chivalric orders can be interpreted as non-state actors of moral soft power, drawing on historical symbols and ethical reference points to foster durable connections between communities, confessional traditions, and cultural spaces.

Historical scholarship introduces a necessary tension into this analysis. Demurger emphasizes the deeply contextual and medieval character of historical chivalric orders, highlighting their dependence on the specific political, military, and canonical structures of their time (Demurger 2009). By contrast, Jaspert nuances this position by showing that the disappearance of the military function does not entail the disappearance of the chivalric ethos, but rather its transformation into a symbolic repertoire reused in modern contexts (Jaspert 2006). This divergence of perspectives allows for a clear distinction between the medieval order and its contemporary reconfigurations, without reducing the neo-chivalric phenomenon to mere historical imitation.

From a theological and institutional perspective, recent research shifts the focus from juridical–canonical succession to moral compatibility and social purpose. Takeda shows that the legitimacy of contemporary orders rests more on doctrinal coherence, ethical integrity, and social mission than on formal continuity (Takeda 2021). This observation converges with Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic recognition as a source of social authority (Bourdieu 1991). Within this framework, neo-chivalric orders function as associations of believers, foundations, or cultural organizations, integrated into modern legal systems and the dynamics of European civil society.

Considered within a shared theoretical debate, the contributions of Wendt, Bourdieu, Nye, and Melissen suggest that the identity, legitimacy, and influence of contemporary chivalric orders cannot be explained through a single analytical paradigm. These dimensions emerge from the interaction between social norms, symbolic capital, and soft power mechanisms, articulated within a European context marked by cultural pluralism and the redefinition of values.

Although constructivist, symbolic, and soft power approaches explain how identities are produced, legitimized, and projected in the public sphere, they do not fully capture the specifically European way in which plural historical traditions are integrated into a shared cultural horizon. This dimension is addressed by Mircea Brie's theory of European identity as a dynamic system of interacting cultural and symbolic layers.

From a perspective convergent with constructivist and symbolic approaches to identity, Mircea Brie shows that European identity is not built through homogenization, but through the interaction of multiple levels of belonging—local, regional, national, and supranational—which coexist within a common symbolic and institutional framework (Brie 2025, 9–11). Identity thus appears not as a fixed given, but as a dynamic reality, expressed in the public sphere through cultural memory, traditions, values, and forms of collective representation, even in a context marked by globalization and pluralism.

This approach is further developed in the earlier formulation by Brie, Polgár, and Chirodea, who describe European identity as a “culture of cultures,” in which the diversity of historical, symbolic, and religious traditions functions as an active resource for cohesion and dialogue within a plural space (Brie, Polgár, and Chirodea 2012). Within this logic, European unity does not result from uniformity, but from the institutional articulation of symbolic and cultural plurality.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a relevant theoretical framework for interpreting contemporary chivalric orders as institutionalized forms of European cultural memory. They articulate identity and legitimacy through ritual, symbol, and spiritual lineage, rather than through claims of strict juridical continuity. In this sense, chivalric orders can be understood as actors in the construction of European identity, transforming spiritual heritage into a form of civic participation, intercultural dialogue, and symbolic cohesion.

Within this conceptual framework, institutions that activate historical memory, ritual, and religious symbolism acquire a distinct relevance in the process of European identity construction. Contemporary chivalric orders can therefore be understood not as anachronisms, but as institutionalized expressions of Europe's “culture of cultures”, transforming spiritual heritage into civic presence and intercultural dialogue.

3. Typology of Chivalric Orders in Contemporary Europe

3.1. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Delimitations

The identification and conceptual delimitation of chivalric orders active in contemporary Europe represent both a methodological and a conceptual

challenge, arising from the position of these structures at the intersection of religious tradition, state authority, and symbolic legitimacy. The contemporary chivalric phenomenon is characterized by a plurality of institutional forms that claim different historical filiations and operate within distinct legal frameworks, ranging from orders enjoying canonical or state recognition to modern neo-chivalric associations primarily oriented toward philanthropy, education, and cultural action.

A part of the classical heraldic and genealogical literature, represented by authors such as Guy Stair Sainty, Peter Bander van Duren, and Robert Gayre of Gayre and Nigg, has proposed various models of classification and criteria of legitimacy for chivalric and dynastic orders. Although these contributions do not constitute the primary theoretical framework of the present analysis, they remain relevant from a descriptive and comparative perspective, as they highlight the ways in which contemporary chivalric traditions construct and negotiate their symbolic legitimacy within different historical and cultural contexts. By including these sources, the study seeks a plural and contextualized understanding of the phenomenon, consistent with the principles of scholarly rigor and critical balance.

The analytical approach is grounded exclusively in verifiable academic literature, which allows contemporary chivalric orders to be interpreted as modern institutional forms of identity production and symbolic legitimacy. Established historical research shows that medieval orders functioned as structures integrated into premodern political and religious systems, with clearly defined military, administrative, and spiritual roles (Barber 1994; Demurger 2009). In the modern era, the loss of military functions did not lead to the disappearance of the chivalric ethos, but rather to its transformation into a symbolic repertoire reused in different social and cultural contexts.

From a sociological perspective, the persistence of chivalric orders can be explained through the mechanisms of symbolic capital, which allow prestige and social authority to be reproduced even in the absence of formal juridical consecration (Bourdieu 1991). Cultural scholarship complements this approach through the concept of “invented tradition,” which highlights how the past is re-signified in order to respond to the identity needs of contemporary communities (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). From an anthropological angle, chivalric orders can be understood as symbolic communities, held together by ritual, myth, and ceremonial language (Anderson 1991).

For the analysis of chivalric orders active in contemporary Europe, the study proposes a functional–historical typology based on symbolic filiation, institutional tradition, and present-day social roles. The aim of this

classification is not to provide an exhaustive inventory of all existing structures, but to delineate several coherent institutional families that are useful for understanding identity formation, modes of legitimation, and patterns of public engagement.

On the basis of these theoretical reference points, the contemporary European chivalric phenomenon can be analysed through five major functional categories: *Hospitaller Orders of Maltese Tradition*, comprising structures originating in the Order of Saint John and primarily oriented toward medical, humanitarian, and charitable activities; *Orders of Hospitaller Tradition of Lazarite Affiliation*, including historical or modern structures inspired by the Order of Saint Lazarus, with a focus on social assistance and Christian philanthropy; *Teutonic Orders with a Spiritual-Religious Profile*, which continue or reinterpret the legacy of the Teutonic Order mainly in religious, cultural, and educational terms; *Templar-Inspired Orders (Neo-Templar)*, consisting of modern organizations that claim a symbolic and moral Templar lineage without medieval juridical continuity; and *Dynastic Orders under the Symbolic Patronage of Saint George*, which encompass honorific or charitable structures associated with royal houses or the European noble tradition.

Today, orders of Maltese, Templar, Lazarite, Teutonic, and Saint George traditions continue, in modernized forms, the charitable and cultural mission of the medieval Christian chivalric fraternities that emerged in the context of the Holy Land.

3.2. Examples of Contemporary Chivalric Orders

The five categories identified reflect the main traditions of European chivalry hospitaller, spiritual-religious, Templar, and dynastic, and allow for a balanced comparative analysis without introducing hierarchies or normative judgments. This methodological choice is consistent with recent scholarly approaches, which prioritize the functional and symbolic analysis of modern chivalric orders over debates concerning formal juridical continuity.

Hospitaller Orders of Maltese Tradition

Orders of Maltese tradition are distinguished by the continuity of the hospitaller ethos and by their predominantly humanitarian orientation. The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta (SMOM) represents the unique case of a chivalric order recognized as a subject of public international law, its legitimacy being grounded in historical continuity, juridical recognition, and institutionalized philanthropic action. Alongside it, the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, a modern British chivalric order under royal patronage, operates exclusively within the charitable and medical sphere,

without claims to sovereignty, and is fully integrated into the civic framework of the United Kingdom. Other structures, such as the Knights of Malta Federation of Autonomous Pories (KMFAP) and the Sovereign Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem (SHOSJ), function as civil or ecumenical organizations that employ hospitaller symbolism for educational, cultural, and humanitarian purposes, their legitimacy being primarily moral and functional rather than juridical. The Ordine dei Cavalieri di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme – Gran Priorato d'Italia similarly belongs to this category as a structure embedded within contemporary Italian civil society.

Hospitaller Orders of Lazarite Tradition

Ordine di San Lazzaro di Gerusalemme (Ordre de Saint-Lazare de Jérusalem) represents a distinct hospitaller tradition, originally associated with the care of lepers and today reconfigured as an international humanitarian and ecumenical network. Its contemporary activities are focused on medical and social projects, with continuity being primarily symbolic and charitable rather than juridical or institutional.

Teutonic Orders with a Spiritual–Religious Profile

Orders of Teutonic tradition illustrate the transformation of chivalry from a military structure into a spiritual and cultural community. The Deutscher Orden constitutes the paradigmatic example of this evolution, functioning today as a Catholic religious order engaged in pastoral, educational, and charitable activities. In parallel, structures such as the Teutonic Order of Holy Mary in Jerusalem – Grand Priory of Europe, the Ordo Equestris Teutonicus (OET), and the Order of Teutonic Knights in Romania operate as cultural or ecumenical organizations that draw on Teutonic symbolism for philanthropic, educational, and heritage-preservation purposes, without asserting medieval juridical continuity.

Orders of Templar Inspiration (Neo-Templar)

Neo-Templar orders represent the most dynamic category of contemporary chivalry, characterized by institutional pluralism and symbolic reinterpretation. The Ordo Supremus Militaris Templi Hierosolymitani (OSMTH) stands out through the international visibility conferred by its consultative status with the United Nations ECOSOC. The Ordre Souverain et Militaire du Temple de Jérusalem (OSMTJ) and the Ordo Militiae Christi – Templar Knights International operate primarily in the philanthropic, educational, and spiritual domains, without claiming medieval juridical continuity. Within this field also belong structures such as the Ordine dei Cavalieri Templari di San Bernardo di Chiaravalle, which combines Templar symbolism with Cistercian spirituality, and L'Ordre Souverain des Templiers Saint-Martin (OSTSM), which advances a European model of neo-chivalry grounded in the Martinian tradition, cultural diplomacy, and social solidarity.

Dynastic Orders under the Symbolic Patronage of Saint George

Dynastic orders associated with Saint George combine the symbolic dimension of chivalry with the historical legitimacy of European noble houses. The Sacred Military Constantinian Order of Saint George and the Imperial Order of Saint George function as dynastic orders with charitable and cultural missions, while structures such as the Royal Order of Saint George for the Defense of the Immaculate Conception and the Szent György Vitéz Lovagrend operate today as honorary and cultural organizations without state-order status, yet endowed with strong identity and symbolic significance.

3.3. Defining Elements of the Identity of Contemporary Chivalric Orders

The identity of contemporary chivalric orders is structured around a reinterpreted symbolic continuity that translates the medieval ethos into the language of modern, universal values. Historical scholarship emphasizes the enduring role of symbols such as the cross, the oath, and the mantle as vehicles of collective memory associated with honour, discipline, and service (Demurger 2009; Jaspert 2006). These elements do not merely preserve a historical legacy but function as active markers of belonging and moral orientation within contemporary chivalric communities.

From a sociological perspective, the concept of symbolic capital provides an explanatory framework for the persistence and public relevance of these orders across different historical and political contexts (Bourdieu 1991). Symbolic resources accumulated through ritual, visual identity, and ethical reputation enable chivalric organizations to generate credibility and authority even in the absence of formal juridical recognition. At the same time, cultural studies highlight the role of re-signified tradition in shaping collective identities within a Europe marked by pluralism and globalization (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

This interpretive framework is further strengthened by Mircea Brie's conception of European identity as a dynamic system of interacting cultural and symbolic layers. Brie argues that European identity is not built through homogenization, but through the coexistence and interaction of multiple levels of belonging local, regional, national, and supranational, within a shared symbolic and institutional horizon (Brie 2025, 9–11). In this perspective, historical traditions and symbolic repertoires remain active components of identity construction rather than residual elements of the past.

Applied to contemporary chivalric orders, this approach allows them to be understood as institutionalized expressions of Europe's "culture of cultures", in which historical memory, ritual, and spiritual lineage are

mobilized to articulate belonging, legitimacy, and ethical purpose in a pluralistic context (Brie, Polgár, and Chirodea 2012). Chivalric identity is thus not grounded in juridical continuity but in the capacity to integrate symbolic heritage into meaningful forms of civic presence and intercultural dialogue.

Taken together, these perspectives indicate that the identity of modern chivalric orders is neither a static survival of medieval structures nor a purely invented tradition. It emerges from the dynamic interaction between historical memory, symbolic practices, and contemporary social engagement, allowing these institutions to function as relevant actors in the cultural and civic landscape of today's Europe.

3.4. SWOT Analysis of Contemporary Chivalric Orders

The application of the SWOT analytical framework makes it possible to evaluate, in a structured way, the institutional and symbolic dynamics of contemporary chivalric orders within European society. Rather than serving as a managerial tool, SWOT is employed here as an interpretative device that helps clarify how these organizations position themselves in relation to legitimacy, identity, and public relevance.

From the perspective of **strengths**, modern chivalric orders benefit from a rich reservoir of symbolic memory and cultural tradition, which provides them with a distinctive historical depth and narrative continuity. Their coherent visual and ritual identity, expressed through heraldry, ceremonial practices, and symbolic language, supports internal cohesion and external recognition. These elements are reinforced by sustained philanthropic engagement and by the existence of relatively stable transnational networks, which enable them to operate beyond local boundaries. Taken together, these features create a significant potential for cultural diplomacy, allowing chivalric organizations to function as carriers of moral and symbolic soft power in the European public space.

At the same time, a number of **structural weaknesses** limit the public and institutional impact of these orders. Most contemporary chivalric organizations lack formal canonical recognition, which can affect their credibility in ecclesiastical contexts. Institutional fragmentation, caused by historical schisms and the proliferation of parallel obediences, further complicates their visibility and coherence. These factors contribute to ambiguous public perceptions regarding their legitimacy and seriousness, while limited financial and human resources restrict the scale and sustainability of their projects.

The contemporary European context also offers significant **opportunities** for chivalric organizations. The growing role of non-state actors in areas such as cultural diplomacy, civil society, and social cohesion

creates new spaces for meaningful engagement. Partnerships with public institutions, universities, museums, and religious organizations can enhance both legitimacy and outreach. Moreover, the expansion of transnational educational programs and the increasing demand for intercultural and interconfessional dialogue provide chivalric orders with a favorable environment in which to articulate their ethical and symbolic missions.

These opportunities, however, are counterbalanced by a set of **threats** that shape the wider neo-chivalric landscape. The proliferation of pseudo-orders and commercially oriented groups that exploit chivalric symbolism undermines public trust and creates confusion about what constitutes an authentic institution. The commodification of symbols, combined with forms of religious or ideological polarization, risks distorting the spiritual and ethical foundations of chivalric identity. In such a context, identity confusion and reputational risks become permanent challenges for serious organizations seeking to maintain credibility and moral authority.

Synthetic Conclusion of the SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis indicates that contemporary chivalric orders operate within a delicate balance between symbolic continuity and institutional vulnerability. Their principal strength lies in their ability to preserve and activate a historical and spiritual heritage that continues to generate meaning, belonging, and public credibility. Symbols, rituals, and sustained philanthropic activity provide these organizations with a distinctive form of symbolic capital, allowing them to remain visible and socially relevant within a European space shaped by pluralism and ongoing identity transformation.

At the same time, the absence of canonical or state recognition, internal fragmentation, and dependence on limited resources constrain the institutional stability of many modern orders. These limitations do not invalidate their social role, but rather orient their legitimacy away from formal authority and toward ethical practice, civic engagement, and community recognition.

From this perspective, opportunities associated with cultural diplomacy, cooperation with academic and public institutions, and the development of transnational educational programs can strengthen the position of chivalric orders as actors within European civil society. Conversely, the spread of pseudo-orders, the commercial exploitation of symbolic heritage, and the risk of identity confusion underscore the need for transparency, moral coherence, and clear institutional boundaries.

Overall, the analysis confirms that the contemporary chivalric order is not a relic of the past but a specific mode of institutionalizing European

memory and values, whose relevance depends on its capacity to transform tradition into civic commitment and to convert historical symbolism into an active resource for cohesion and intercultural dialogue.

4. Case Study: The Sovereign Templar Order of Saint Martin (OSTSM)

4.1. Identity Genesis, Spiritual Foundations, and Symbolism

L'Ordre Souverain des Templiers Saint-Martin (OSTSM), hereafter referred to as the Sovereign Templar Order of Saint Martin, is an international neo-chivalric organization inspired by the Templar tradition and grounded in Christian values and the Western heritage of chivalry, reinterpreted within a contemporary framework. The Order does not claim medieval juridical continuity, but explicitly assumes a symbolic and moral lineage, adapted to the current European context, in which philanthropic, cultural, and educational functions prevail over any form of formal historical authority.

The spiritual core of OSTSM's identity is shaped by the figure of Saint Martin of Tours (316–397), venerated in Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions and regarded as one of the earliest *milites Christi*. His founding gesture—the sharing of his cloak with a poor man—has become an archetypal symbol of active charity and of the transformation of the warrior into a protector. OSTSM draws directly on this Martinian model, interpreted as a precursor to the establishment of Christian chivalric orders, and defines its mission around active compassion, moral discipline, and service to the vulnerable.

This paradigm of the “warrior transformed into protector” constitutes the spiritual axis of the Order. Initiation rituals preserve classical elements of chivalry—such as the cloak, the sword, and the oath—but these are reinterpreted exclusively in ethical terms, as moral commitments rather than symbols of coercive authority. The red patée cross bearing the monogram *SM* (*Sanctus Martinus*) visually expresses the synthesis between Martinian spirituality and chivalric ethos.

This identity construction must also be understood within the context of post-secular Europe, where religion no longer functions as a dominant normative authority but continues to provide meaningful symbolic and moral reference points. In this sense, OSTSM operates within a logic of selective recovery of Christian memory, not as a means of asserting confessional power, but as a way of articulating an ethical discourse compatible with contemporary cultural and religious pluralism.

4.2. Organizational Structure, European Outreach, and Civic Action

From an institutional perspective, OSTSM operates as a non-profit, non-political international organization under civil law. Its internal structure is organized into General Territorial Governances, National Grand Priories, Regional Bailiwicks, and Local Commanderies, an architecture designed to ensure both doctrinal coherence and operational flexibility within a diverse European environment.

The Order's network is active in Romania, France, Germany, Hungary, Slovenia, Greece, and Cyprus. In each of these settings, OSTSM conducts its activities under the umbrella of the *Knight-Art* concept, its own instrument of cultural diplomacy that integrates heritage, artistic expression, tradition, volunteering, and philanthropy. *Knight-Art* events (Arad, Corfu, Kolossi) function as platforms of symbolic and civic dialogue, bringing together members of the Order, supporters, clergy, and representatives of academic, cultural, and community institutions.

The educational dimension is strengthened through the program "The Young Templar Guards of Saint Martin" (in Romanian: *Tinerii Străjeri Templieri Sfântul Martin*), addressed to children and adolescents and focused on character formation, discipline, and civic responsibility. Inspired by European scouting models and adapted to Christian and chivalric values, this initiative contributes to the transmission of a shared moral culture across generations.

Through its educational and cultural projects, OSTSM operates as an actor of informal civic education, complementary to classical institutional systems. The transmission of values through ritual, symbol, and community practice fosters a specific form of cultural capital in which discipline, responsibility, and solidarity are internalized through experience rather than through normative discourse alone.

4.3. Legitimacy, Symbolic Sovereignty, and Doctrinal Compatibility

The symbolism of OSTSM serves a dual function: internally, it reinforces identity and cohesion; externally, it structures public representation. Heraldry, the mantle, the ceremonial sword, and ritual language are embedded in an internal moral code that regulates the ethical conduct of members. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, these practices can be understood as forms of symbolic capital, generating moral authority and public credibility that depend on the congruence between discourse and action.

OSTSM's legitimacy is not juridical or canonical, but moral, spiritual, and cultural, deriving from its philanthropic, educational, and community-

oriented activities. The Order respects the principles of the 1983 Code of Canon Law concerning the right of the faithful to associate, operating as a private association of believers with a multiconfessional profile, without claiming ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

The use of the term “*sovereign*” requires a clear conceptual distinction. In international law, sovereignty implies territory, diplomatic capacity, and the exercise of state prerogatives—criteria that OSTSM neither fulfills nor claims. In this context, OSTSM’s sovereignty must be understood exclusively as symbolic sovereignty, expressing internal autonomy and the capacity for identity-based self-regulation. This usage differs fundamentally from the model of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (SMOM), the only contemporary chivalric institution with internationally recognized state sovereignty.

By explicitly distancing itself from unverifiable genealogical claims and from pseudo-chivalric structures, OSTSM strengthens its public credibility and reduces the risk of institutional confusion.

4.4. The Suppression of the Templar Order and the Rise of Neo-Chivalry: A Theological Perspective

The canonical analysis conducted by Rev. Sorin Sevcicu (2025) offers one of the most balanced theological interpretations of the contemporary neo-chivalric phenomenon. His approach starts from the historical reality of the suppression of the Templar Order in 1312 and emphasizes that, although the juridical structure disappeared, the Templar moral and symbolic ethos survived and was re-appropriated in the modern era.

Over the last two centuries, more than one hundred chivalric organizations inspired by Templar spirituality have emerged, differing widely in structure and in their relationship with the Churches. This proliferation reflects a contemporary need for moral, symbolic, and communal reference points rather than an attempt to claim direct historical continuity. While the Catholic Church recognizes only those orders that possess historical succession, it does not prohibit pastoral cooperation with lay structures that respect Christian moral principles.

Within this framework, multiconfessional orders such as OSTSM cannot receive universal canonical recognition. Their legitimacy, however, remains civil, moral, and spiritual, grounded in the conformity of their activities with Christian doctrine and in voluntary cooperation with clergy from various confessions, without generating ecclesiological tensions.

4.5. Comparative Positioning, Challenges, and European Potential

When compared with other contemporary neo-Templar structures, such as OSMTH and OSMTJ, OSTSM is distinguished by its internal

stability, doctrinal coherence, and its explicit distancing from disputable genealogical and historical claims. OSMTH benefits from greater international diplomatic visibility, yet it is affected by internal fragmentation, while OSMTJ continues to be marked by long-standing historical schisms. By contrast, OSTSM stands out through a more compact organizational structure and a clearly articulated identity that is currently undergoing institutional consolidation.

At the same time, the Order operates in a European environment characterized by institutional fragmentation, the proliferation of pseudo-orders, and competition for symbolic legitimacy. International expansion entails challenges related to the standardization of rituals, the training of local leadership, and the preservation of a unified identity within a transnational network. Like any NGO, OSTSM also depends on volunteer dynamics and variable financial resources, which may influence both the pace of its projects and its degree of public visibility.

From this perspective, OSTSM's activities may be interpreted as forms of moral soft power, in which influence is exercised not through institutional authority or material resources, but through ethical credibility, symbolic continuity, and the capacity to generate trust in the public sphere. The cultural diplomacy practiced by the Order functions as a diplomacy of meaning, oriented toward dialogue, reconciliation, and community cohesion.

Overall, the OSTSM case study demonstrates that the contemporary chivalric order can no longer be approached as a relic of the past, but rather as an adaptive institutional form situated at the intersection of memory, identity, and civic action. Its relevance lies not in historical claims, but in its ability to transform tradition into an active resource for contemporary Europe.

Conclusions

The analysis of contemporary chivalric orders, with particular emphasis on the case study of the Sovereign Templar Order of Saint Martin (OSTSM), demonstrates that modern chivalry cannot be reduced to a symbolic survival of the Middle Ages. Instead, it represents a dynamic process of cultural and spiritual re-signification adapted to the social and normative conditions of twenty-first-century Europe. The identity of these orders is constructed at the intersection of tradition, civil society, and democratic values, within a framework in which legitimacy is no longer derived from juridical continuity or canonical authority, but from moral coherence, symbolic capital, and social impact.

The research shows that contemporary chivalric orders function today as non-state actors in the European public sphere, active in philanthropy,

civic education, cultural diplomacy, and interconfessional dialogue. This evolution reflects a fundamental transformation of the chivalric ethos: from the medieval warrior and defender of the faith to the modern cultural mediator, promoter of solidarity, and agent of civic responsibility. Chivalry is no longer defined by the exercise of force or by sacralized authority, but by ethical commitment, volunteerism, and the capacity to generate shared meaning and social trust.

Within this framework, OSTSM emerges as a relevant example of functional neo-chivalry. Its clearly articulated identity, its explicit distancing from unverifiable genealogical claims, and its integration into the logic of European civil society distinguish it from many other neo-Templar structures. The Martinian spiritual foundation, interpreted as a precursor to the establishment of Christian chivalric orders, enables the Order to avoid both medieval nostalgia and the instrumentalization of religious symbols, offering instead an ethical model oriented toward active compassion, moral discipline, and service to others.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms the value of an integrated analytical framework combining social constructivism, the theory of symbolic capital, and the concepts of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Through this lens, chivalric orders appear as institutionalized producers of identity and legitimacy, in which symbols, rituals, and organizational practices operate as resources of moral and cultural influence. The inclusion of the theological-canonical perspective proposed by Rev. Sorin Sevcicu further clarifies the distinction between formal ecclesiastical recognition and doctrinal compatibility, helping to avoid frequent confusions present in non-academic discussions of the neo-Templar phenomenon.

The academic contribution of this article lies in its conceptual clarification of the legitimacy of modern chivalric orders, in its interdisciplinary interpretation of the phenomenon, and in its demonstration that contemporary chivalry is relevant not only for historical or theological inquiry, but also for European studies, international relations, and symbolic sociology. The OSTSM case study serves as a heuristic device for understanding broader processes of identity reconstruction in post-secular Europe.

The practical and societal relevance of the findings is equally important. Contemporary chivalric orders complement official diplomacy through forms of participatory cultural diplomacy grounded in heritage, art, education, and philanthropy. OSTSM's initiatives, ranging from the *Knight-Art* programs to youth-oriented educational projects, illustrate how a neo-chivalric organization can build transnational networks of cultural cooperation and contribute to shaping Europe as a space of dialogue and

solidarity. In this sense, modern chivalry operates as a form of moral soft power suited to a pluralistic and fragmented European environment.

At the same time, the research acknowledges its limitations. The qualitative and interpretative nature of the analysis, uneven access to internal organizational documentation, and the difficulty of systematic comparison among multiple neo-Templar groups require caution in generalizing the results. These limitations do not undermine the conclusions, but rather indicate promising directions for future research, including sociological surveys on public perceptions of chivalric legitimacy, comparative European studies, and systematic evaluations of the educational and cultural impact of chivalric youth organizations.

In conclusion, contemporary chivalry should not be seen as a relic of the past, but as an emerging form of European symbolic capital. Through the synthesis of tradition and innovation, spirituality and education, ritual and social action, modern chivalric orders assert their relevance as actors of moral cohesion and intercultural dialogue. Consistent with Mircea Brie's understanding of European identity as a dynamic "culture of cultures," built from overlapping historical, symbolic, and spiritual layers rather than from homogenization, contemporary chivalric orders such as OSTSM can be interpreted as institutional expressions of this plural European memory, transforming heritage into civic presence and dialogue (Brie 2025). In a Europe confronted with identity fragmentation and crises of meaning, reinterpreted chivalry offers not a nostalgic refuge, but a symbolic language capable of articulating solidarity, responsibility, and civic commitment in a form that remains intelligible and credible in the contemporary public sphere.

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The Turkish State as a Pan-Family. From Micro to Macro Environment: Societal Values and the Good-Bad Binomen

Irina-Maria Cosma¹

Abstract

We analyse the role of the Turkish family, as not a singular, but rather a collective entity in the Turkish culture; it is a fundamental element for it represents a micro-Turkish state, as the Turkish state is, extendedly, a pan-family. Therefore, family becomes one of the most important values, a sacred institution which has become a symbolic value for its importance, both religious and societal. Family guides the construction of the society through marriage, a collective process of enclosing the circle of fate and symbolising prosperity. The reference genome in the Turkish society is the people (“el âlem”), being a collectivistic culture. We analyse the societal values around the concept of komşuluk – a term describing close relations between the members of the community, which has become a reference for the good-bad binomen, namely for what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in the society.

Keywords

Turkish family, good-bad binomen, komşuluk, community, values, collectivist culture.

1. Introduction.

Family symbolises the meeting of the communities, becoming a spiritual means of constructing communities and implicitly, constructing the Turkish society in its entirety. The importance of family comes from its meanings in the Turkish culture: to have a home means to have stability, attributes which Turks lacked in the migratory period of their existence, from where the trauma occurred. Getting married is, thence, not a question, but a response representing a micro-Turkish state and vice-versa, the Turkish state and society represent a pan-family.

This response assures the closing of the circle, a crucial symbol for the Turkish cultural identity. For instance, a bride must go from a home to another home (ev-lenmek) in order to avoid displacement and interruption of the existential knots, for düğün (wedding) literally means “to make a knot”

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in the societal tie. In between homes represents a rift, which is an interruption of the continuous rotation of the Turkish circle.

The idea of circularity is a very important symbol also from the cult teachings, where the deeds and the intentions behind them always come back to the person acting. In a community with strong intra-societal ties such as the Turkish community, the reference genome is not the individual self, but rather all the individual selves, i.e. the collective (*el âlem*) – the people. Due to the fact that good deeds and empathy are always directed towards the other, this alterity becomes a crucial entity in the cultural identity, from where the concept of *komşuluk*.

Family

According to the Turkish sociologist Ziya Gökalp, “*aile milletin küçük bir parçasıdır*”, meaning that “*family is a small piece of the nation*” (İçli). This is why sometimes the rules (in terms of traditions, customs, conducts) coming from the family, and especially in the generational cleavage might be perceived as (peer) pressure and questioned. Nevertheless, it is to be mentioned that till they became routinized, they were first constructed – the construction of familial patterns can be related to the very beginning of administrative existence – where tribal Turks established tight ties among themselves and with each other. In other words, a Turkish tribe is nothing else than an extended family.

The rules they created, the bond, unity and hierarchy are some specific elements that today’s Turkish families have – the routinized patterns were incipiently basic needs for the good continuity of the community.

Therefore, family is crucial since it represents a *mirroring of the society itself* – one entirety bordered in a sole unit, become the reference point of the community.

Before it is a *blood tie*, family is a *construction*, two fundamental characteristics that create a *circle* of determinations: for one generation (the first one), family is a *choice* i.e. *formation* – people *construct* their family based on their choice of wife or husband; for their children (the next negation), family is a *given* – and now we have a binomen. The given determines them to make a choice of their future family – i.e. *transformation* – which is never solely an independent choice, never based on personal preferences only, but rather an accumulation of collective choices and determinations, creating and enclosing the *circle*, predominant symbol in the Turkish culture.

There is a primary *hierarchy*, even if not always consciously perceived, which sets patterns and influences choices – and this is one of the most

important factors that determines the *collective* character of the Turkish culture.

This makes people perceive themselves in relation with other people to which they belong, and implicitly in relation to groups – their traits are therefore not *abstract* (Nickerson, 2023), but rather meaningful, since they have roots that symbolise the pillars of a people's value system. Even the term used for describing it is meaningful: *evlenmek* means *to get married*, but literally, it means “*to get a home*” – following the same route, the term *ev* (“house, home”) is interchangeably used as “*family*” or “*ancestry*”. Accordingly, a *house* is not entirely a *home* without a *family*. The idea of circularity is also present here: people go from a *home* to another *home*, the first one is given, and the second one is created – families are numerous, but in essence, there is only one.

As a material example in this sense, it is believed that in history, one of the the most important objects in Turks' households was the dowry chest (*çeyiz sandığı*), and in the families with girls, there is the custom of getting a dowry for the girl and preparing the chest for marriage. When she reaches the age of marriage (*gelinlik yaşı*), her dowry chest is considered to be her most important object (Kademoğlu, 1999, p. 18). Therefore, the dowry chest becomes a metaphor – symbolising the importance and necessity of perpetuating the values from one generation to the other.

Family influences Turks' perception on themselves, since the Turkish society is rather a *pan-family* and the Turkish family is a *micro-Turkish state*.

There are numerous stages of creating a family: *görücülük-dünürcülük, söz kesme, nişan, düğün* (Tezcan, 2000, p. 36). *Görücülük* refers to *looking for a girl, choosing a girl* – the word coming from the root “*gör*” which means “*see*”. *Dünürcülük* takes place after *görücülük*, that is after a girl has been chosen, and it refers to the going to the girl and asking for her hand (Tezcan, 2000, p. 37). It is to be noted that in these stages, the most important aspects are *standards*: the boy's relatives, neighbours and close people (Tezcan, 2000, p. 37) are the most important characters – they are the ones that check whether a girl fits their standards or not. Once again, this is a reflection of the predominance of collective values over individual preferences – or, in other words, of the influence of collective norms on personal *choices*. Another such example is “*beşik kertmesi*”, involving promising a new-born girl to a new-born boy from their very birth – this is done by the two families which are in good relations by a mutual promise towards each other, especially when the two babies are born in the same day (Tezcan, 2000, p. 68). This type of engagement promise is present in the Book of Dede Korkut, as a very old custom (Bakırcı, 2018).

The following stage is related to the *agreement* – the two parties take an official decision for the wedding. The idiom *söz kesmek* literally translates as “to cut the word”, but it means to give the promise that the engagement between the two parties will lead to a wedding. This is immediately followed by *nişan*, meaning *engagement*. This is only a verbal engagement, while *nikâh* is a material engagement, which is a more formal, official engagement – either religious or judicial. There is a very important moment around the engagement – and that is the exchange of rings and afterwards, separating them by cutting the ribbon: the engagement rings are brought on a tray, along with a red ribbon with which they are tied together, and scissors. The rings are offered to the bride and groom, put on their hands with the ribbon uniting them, after which the ribbon is cut. The ribbon symbolises a *tie*, a *bond* between the two people coming together, but it also symbolises the approval of the families and of the community on their marriage. The ribbon and especially the colour red symbolise *purity* (Akcan, 2024), symbol present also at the wedding ceremony, where the bride’s dress is accessorised with a red ribbon around the waist to show her purity.

Moreover, the future bride prepares Turkish coffee for the family members present, but adds *salt* to the future husband’s coffee cup, so that the coffee would taste badly and would be difficult to be drunk. This symbolises a test for the future husband – if he drinks the entire cup of coffee, it means he is able to bear any kind of difficulty throughout the marriage. This represents a very important characteristic of the Turkish family – the traditional belief that the husband is the householder, who should take care of the entire family. In this way, family becomes a social *construct*, due to the meanings it is attributed.

Another fundamental characteristic of family construction which is present throughout the entire process is the *exchange of gifts*. This is called *armağanlaşma* (Tezcan, 2000, p. 36), a term having roots in old Turkish from the term “*doyumluk*” (*armağan*), literally meaning the state of being filled, fulfilled – therefore it symbolises abundance and prosperity (*bereket*), an element crucial for the future household. More than prosperity, it is seen as a way through which people *help* each other (Tezcan, 2000, p. 41).

The very moment before the actual wedding is the henna night, *kına gecesi*, a ritual moment dedicated to the future wife, but a rather sad event – symbolising that the wife leaves her family’s home. The future wife has to listen to sad traditional songs because crying is considered to be mandatory (Tezcan, 2000, p. 39). Crying is considered to be mandatory because this very moment means a *fissure* in the *circle* – the bride is *in-between* the first home and the second home, therefore the collective mind translates this as

uprooting or displacement, till the path from a home to the other is completed and the circle is enclosed again.

During the ceremony, the future wife's fist is painted with henna and a gold coin. One of the prevalent meanings of henna in Turkish culture is devotion, commitment. This way, henna is given a spiritual meaning, bringing it closer to divinity. Moreover, due to the fact that it colours, it is believed that it protects from the bad, providing good luck (*şans*) and prosperity (*bereket*) (Tanrıbuyurdu). We can observe that *bereket* is a repetitive symbol in the Turkish familial culture, having a profound religious meaning: in Arabic, the term *baraka* means blessing, especially related to the divine blessing. Therefore, God's *blessing* is *prosperity* for the household. This shows that Turkish cultural identity is multi-layered: everything being governed by supra-human forces and having precise meanings and symbols.

Another important element is *damat hamamı* (*the hammam of the groom*), a tradition where the groom and his male family members gather at the hammam (public bathhouse) before the wedding and prepare themselves in the day before the wedding (Taşçıoğlu, 1998, p. 126). The importance of water is one of the primordial traits of human civilisations, when “people witnessed its help in production, making life possible, a reward when it exists and a punishment when it does not exist or it is little” (Taşçıoğlu, 1998, p. 13). “People even believed that water had hidden forces” (Taşçıoğlu, 1998, p. 13) and “the ones teaching religious rules set the condition of washing due to its importance for praying and purifying from sins” (Taşçıoğlu, 1998, p. 13). This is another example of a construction of reality, where natural elements are attributed supernatural, unearthly forces, creating a tie between the material and the immaterial (spiritual) – the people and the divinity.

We shall analyse the ultimate point of family creation – the wedding. In Turkish, the term for wedding is *düğün*, originating from the old Turkish term *tüğün*, from the root “*tüg*”, literally meaning to create a tie or to make a knot (*düğün*)– therefore the wedding is a knot in the societal tie. In modern Turkish, the term *düğün* can also be used in the sense of *toy – ziyafet*, meaning “celebration” and *cemiyet*, also meaning “community”. According to these meanings, wedding is *celebrating a community formation* – here, one family plus one family equals one family, that is (*one and not two*) because the newly formed family is not new, since the starting point is not zero, but two – therefore, it cannot equal itself.

In other words, the newly formed family is only a result of one family unit and another family unit – it is not new, but only another knot on the *constant*. The Turkish family will always equal one – because no matter how numerous they are, ultimately it is only *one*.

The wedding ritual “takes place within standard patterns” and its objective is to “announce the couple to the *environment*” – this makes *the environment* i.e. community “an important factor in a wedding event” (Tezcan, 2000, p. 35). In other words, “wedding is not only a singular, isolated event, but an event that interests the *community* and in which *community* takes part” (Tezcan, 2000, p. 35). As a social event, wedding has several functions: the first one to be noted is music and ambience, dance and entertainment (Tezcan, 2000, p. 36) – which take it from the pragmatic level to the spiritual one, with accent on the soul – this is a specificity of the Turkish culture, people finding the well-being of the soul more important than the well-being of the body: “73.8% of the Turks included in a survey prioritise the well-being of the soul over the well-being of the body and 75.2% consider that faith has a positive impact on the well-being of the soul” (Araştırma: Türk Halkı için Ruh Sağlığı Beden Sağlığından Daha Önemli, 2024). In relation to this function is another function – that is: weddings “enrich living and ensure relief from a monotonous life” (Tezcan, 2000, p. 36).

Another function of the wedding is that it consolidates solidarity and interdependence and it establishes a psychological reinforcement – approval and validation, in the case of some people, because it opens a way for them to show-off their talents. Moreover, it is a good place for some jobs, occupations to take place (Tezcan, 2000, p. 36). *Circularity* is related to the function that weddings ensure “a redistribution of income, of what people earn” so that “*money changes hands*” and wealth is shared (Tezcan, 2000, p. 36). Therefore, wedding is one of the most important arguments that Turkish culture is collectivistic, due to its functions that re-balance the societal equilibrium. In addition, it is believed that “weddings represent the best example that mirrors the Turkish national culture” (Tezcan, 2000, p. 47).

The new-born is given *gold* and it is usually accompanied by a *nazar* talisman – to have a prosperous (*bereketli*) life away from the *evil's eye* (8 Maddede Türk Kültüründe Bebek Karşılama Geleneği, 2024).

Therefore, according to Turks themselves, the Turkish nation is nothing else but a great family, a big family. This *familist* perspective stands also in the religious principles of perpetuating the traditional family, but also the cultural values. In other words, family is a construction that protects other constructions (the *values*) and ensures their perpetuation.

The Turkish family is a closed circle, the double determination being created by the fact that on one hand, it is the bearer of values, but on the other hand, it is also the nucleus of the values, the starting point, the birth place of those values that weigh a lot in the cultural identity. The mechanism

is simple: if the family is the nucleus, then the society is the meeting point of all the fragments created in the nucleus. When they meet in the large community, the values generate commonalities and thence, practices.

This phenomenon also takes place because families, if having a strong role in a society, function similar to the trend-setters: they generate models.

Value System: The Good-Bad Binomen and Spirituality Reflected in the Society

One of the most difficult subjects to be tackled when describing a people is their traditions, customs or belief system, for “they are hard to isolate enough to define” (Gibbs). In other words, “people would not know their tradition, for they simply lived in it” (Gibbs) – that is, they have been blended so well into the *body* (i.e. *identity*) so that they became one. But in order for people to be able to define one according to the other, the two (identity and tradition) would have to be a little exotic to each other.

Family is the centre or the nucleus of the community also because it is the environment that gives birth to a series of customs, beliefs, traditions and imprints people with a system of values.

This is something especially valid in Eastern civilisations, where the *people's (el âlem) opinions* represent a very strong self-perpetuated restrictive and constrictive mechanism. Therefore, if a family generates good values thence practices, many other such groups would immediately follow their model just because it is seen as a precious act, evaluated positively in the society.

To be more specific, we choose *spirituality* as an example; from a generation to another, the quality of being spiritual (i.e. religious) has been perpetuated and became a self-generated value in the Turkish family and society. Spirituality is culturally-specific, but for the example in question, we explain spirituality as a value that generates the possible following practices: being a good person towards the other members of the community, doing good deeds, wearing a certain type of garments that are considered to be *decent* (i.e. “conforming with standards of propriety, good taste or morality” (decent) in that specific society).

Even if sociologically *good* and *bad* are not general quantifiers, the common sense in each society attributes to each value and practice an opposite value and practice chosen informally, by the members of each society; and in many cases, the pair is made of a good, valuable element and a bad one that should not be followed. The mathematical equation is the *value* and the *non-value*, as its negative.

According to the Turkish societal structure, spirituality is and has been generally seen as a good value, generating good practices and forming people positively. Therefore, the reverse of spirituality is *non-spirituality*, forming people to most probably not be empathetic towards the others, dress indecently, and not follow the praying rituals in places of worship.

From all the above written, we deduce that very many Turkish families embraced the value of being spiritual, since it is socially not only acceptable, but also rewarded.

Because of that, an entire culture was formed to promote spirituality: for instance, geopolitically, *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (*The Directorate for Religious Affairs*) has been building mosques in the Balkans, “slowly positioning itself as the strongest Muslim institution in the region” (Muhasilovic).

Many *customs* are related to the very beginning of the Turkish existence – tribal and migratory life – since they invoke a number of natural elements. For example, water has a great significance in the Turkish culture, especially due to its *motion*. When someone close – either a family member or a friend – leaves for a journey, the ones who remain at home use to throw a bucket of water behind them under the saying “*su gibi git, su gibi gel*”, meaning “go like the water, come like the water” and “*yolun açık olsun*”, i.e. “may your path be clear”. This means that they wish a clear path with no obstacles but also, we can observe the idea of *circularity*: coming back to the starting point, i.e. to the *origins*.

The value system in the Turkish culture is, similar to other cultures, based on the *good-bad binomen*, where good values (like empathy, helpfulness, good intentions) should prevail upon the bad ones (bad intentions, envy etc.).

Komşuluk

The term “*komşuluk*” comes from the noun “*komşu*”, which means “neighbour”, from the old Turkish term “*konşu*”, describing “*someone who lives in proximity*” (*komşu*) Therefore, *komşuluk* describes *neighbourhood*, the state of living close to each other. In the case of the Turkish society, neighbourhood is considered “one of the fundamental relations”, having an *informal* character (Yıldız), due to the fact that it has a great impact on the way in which people conduct their life. The importance of neighbours is described in the proverb “*ev alma, komşu al*” (Yıldız), meaning: “*do not pick a house, but rather pick a neighbour*”, according to the general belief that “neighbours are even *more important* than the house”. The respect between neighbours (*komşu hatırı*) is an obligation with religious origins, found in Islamic cult teachings: “A Muslim will greet their neighbour when they meet, on a good basis; they will honour the invitation of their neighbours when it

is the case, they will visit their neighbour if they are sick and if they are hungry, they will give their neighbours half of their own food” (Yıldız). At the psychological level, neighbourhood contributes to the feeling of “us” instead of “I” (Yıldız). In other words, neighbourhood contributes profoundly to the creation of the *belonging feeling* of an individual, combining both the material and immaterial elements of the world: “neighbourhood means building the soil with a spiritual foundation” (Yıldız).

In more technical terms, this social group not only contributes to the belonging of the individual to the community, but also and more importantly, functions similar to a regulating mechanism in terms of accepted and acceptable social values and norms.

Extended to the Turkish community, one of the most important *repressive mechanisms* is considered to be “*el âlem*”, literally “*the people*” – the *collective character* becomes the *genome of reference* for the individuals. This is a mechanism of the society itself through which the balance is constantly restored, starting from the moral level to the level of concrete deeds. This governing power’s sui-generis character resides in the lack of actual punishments – individuals who do not comply with the rigours are not actually banned from the community, but rather detached, hence the greatest form of punishment is the comeback from “us” to “I”, i.e. the social and communal individualisation of a person, rather difficult to be dealt with in a collectivist community and society. The problem is not that the individual is excluded, but in fact, that the individual cannot be excluded since its *social attributes* are part of the mass culture – what makes an individual unique is not that each person owns some attributes that are necessarily and essentially different from those of other people, but rather the rotation and combination of attributes leading to a unique blend of those attributes. This can be understood as a mechanism that guarantees the *continuity* of values and thence, of the society itself – again, the idea of self-sacrifice for the common good. Not only the continuity of values, but the continuity of *good values* is crucial so that there are more values considered *good* than values considered *harmful* for the society.

If *komşuluk* represents a desirable type of interaction among the members of the community, there are also relations that are believed to be harmful – socially and psychologically. These are related to jealousy and envy, elements considered to be hurtful and not desirable in the Turkish value system. The popular beliefs are formed around the concept of *nazar*, from the Arabic *nadhar*, literally meaning “*look*”, “*sight*”, but materialised under the form of a *blue eye*. *Nazar* is believed to be the “*evil eye*”, referring to a bad-intended look of someone towards another person. In the popular culture, it is believed that people can actually get sick because of someone’s

bad look (*nazar*), saying that those people “*have come to nazar*” (*nazara gelmek*). There is also a cure in the mystic culture – pouring lead to send away bad thoughts (Gelenek ve Görenekler). Despite the fact that these beliefs are superstitions, the aspects that are more ideologically relevant are religious-based, i.e. the *intention* (*niyyah*) of that person, which can be envy, hate or other similar feelings, considered to be “*a disease of the soul*”.

These moral aspects are materialised through the *eyes* – a symbolic element in the Middle Eastern history throughout time, where eyes had a dualist character – they were either *good* or *bad*, just like any other force in the nature (Dilek). This is present in today’s society as well, in the relations between people – when someone makes a compliment, the response is usually not only “thank you”, but also “*gören gözlerin güzeldir*”, which translates as “*your eyes that see like this are beautiful*”; in other words, if someone sees the other person as beautiful or good, it is because of themselves, because their own eyes are *good*.

Conclusions

Etymologically, family comes from the Latin “*familia*”, referring to the *servants* in a house or household (from the “*famulus*” – “*servant*”).

Extendedly, we can use this etymological route to explain that family serves in the community formation process. Another understanding can refer to the aspect of family members serving each other, especially in the case of a collectivist culture, where individuals give and take from each other values and teachings shared in the community.

The Turkish family represents the starting point, the *centrum* for the perpetuation of societal values, traditions, customs. The state mirrors at a macro level the structure of a family, i.e. the values, principles learnt by the people among their families are extended to the level of the entire society and mirrored by the state policies. Therefore, family is crucial since it represents a *mirroring of the society itself*.

We can admit that family represents a symbol in itself, having become a crucial part of *Turkishness* (the Turkish ethos) and being both material and immaterial due to its profound significances for the continuity of the community itself.

In the Turkish society, the reference genome is considered to be the entire community, due to its collectivist cultural profile, where the individual good arises from the common good and implicitly coincides with it.

Therefore, *komşuluk* – the relations of vicinity – are crucial for the society, not only because they contribute to the perpetuation of values, but they also represent a coercive mechanism: the sanctions for those who do

not follow tradition represent the comeback from “us” to “I” or, in other words, an isolation of the individual from the group. *Komşuluk* has become one of the most important relations in the society also because of its spiritual foundation, appealing to the need to act according to the acceptable or good aspects in the value system.

Furthermore, within the society, there is a value system formed around the principle of good (i.e. acceptable) and bad (i.e. unacceptable) behaviours or deeds. This value system is protected by *the people* (*el âlem*) and inter-generationally perpetuated. In this way, it was incorporated in the Turkish common sense, understood as the collective subconscious and acting according to standardised patterns.

The Turkish value system is an abstract representation of the concrete predominance of collective values over individual preferences in the Turkish society and within Turkish communities. Therefore, within communities, values become self-generated in order to maintain circularity whenever the *societal circle* is *fissured*. That is why we can admit that marriage is symbolically doubled – not only it means the perpetuation of the community, but is a metaphor in itself, where *düğün* (wedding) refers to the continuum of knots in the societal tie.

Mirroring the familial analogy, the circle is enclosed in the following manner: the people is the one that mirrors the growth – i.e. education – and the state – understood as the representative entity of the people – mirrors people’s conduct at the level of policies.

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BOOK REVIEWS

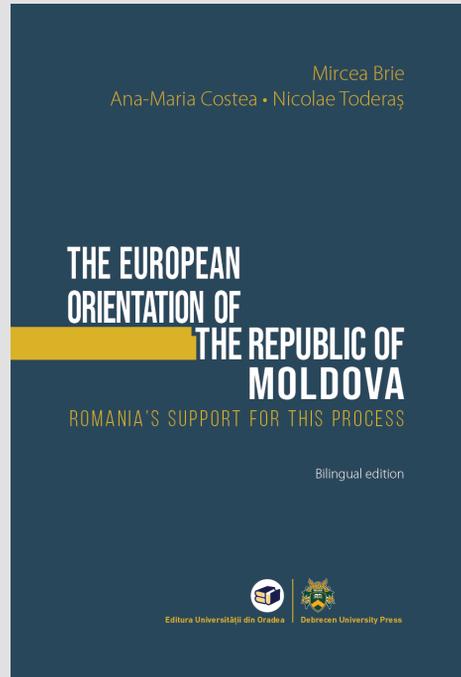
Book Review of: Mircea Brie, Ana-Maria Costea and Nicolae Toderaş

Orientarea Europeană a Republicii Moldova. Demersuri de sprijinire din partea României / The European Orientation of the Republic of Moldova. Romania's support for this process

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Review by *Anca Oltean*¹



This book was achieved with the assistance of European Institute of Romania in the framework of the research programme SPOS 2024, namely *The European orientation of the Republic of Moldova. Romania's support for this process*.

Chapter one is entitled *Introduction and methodology*. In this chapter it is pointed out the evolution of the relations between Republic of Moldova and European Union. The intergovernmental conference from Luxembourg from June 25, 2025 marked the beginnings of the negotiations of the adherence of Republic of Moldova to European Union. In 2016, it was signed the Association agreement between Republic of Moldova to European Union which had foreseen the creation of a free trade area between the two zones. Another important moment was May 21, 2024, when EU signed with the Republic of Moldova a partnership for security and defence. According to the predictions, Republic of Moldova will probably adhere to EU in 2030. In this broader context, Romania has the role to promote Romanian language and culture in the Republic of Moldova. The region was affected by the annexation of Crimea by Russian Federation in 2014, followed by the

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invasion of Ukraine by the Russians after February 2022 (Bărbulescu; Brie, & Toderaş, 2016; Brie, 2016; Brie, 2021b).

The authors points out that, in spite of these political challenges, EU accepted the fact the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to become its candidate states in spite of the growing opposing of Moscow in the year 2023. The two countries started, in consequence, the negotiations for adherence to EU. The authors define the purpose of this collective work: „The present study has as target the analysis of the relations between the Republic of Moldova and European Union and to identify the main domains in which Romania can offer expertise and transfer of good practices in the field of European Integration” (transl.) (Brie et al., 2025: 22).

The present volume intends to further analyse the following objectives: “The analysis of the dynamics of the process of European integration of the Republic of Moldova in the contemporary geopolitical context”, “The achievement of a SWOT analysis concerning the evolution and the dynamics of the process of European integration of the Republic of Moldova”, “The identification, analysis and evaluation of the modalities by which Romania can contribute to the consolidation and expansion of the progresses achieved by Republic of Moldova in an integrative process”, “The construction of certain alternative scenarios concerning the political and geopolitical evolution”, “The formulation of certain recommendations which to sustain the acceleration of the implementation of the necessary reforms in the view of bringing closer the Republic of Moldova and the European Union”, “the formulation of certain recommendations of public communication in order to support the authorities from the Republic of Moldova in the promotion of the process of European integration”.

Chapter 2 is entitled, *The European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the current geopolitical context*. The authors focus on the evolution of geopolitical context of EU and Republic of Moldova. The region confronted with two trends: (1) the expansion towards Est of European Union and NATO and (2) the trend of Russian Federation to regain its influence from the time of the dominance of USSR, using including its military force in this sense. Several crises hit European continent, European Union and its neighbours such as: the economic and financial crisis, the migration from Near East and Northern Afrika on European territory, the crises generated by the virus Covid-19.

Another aspect signalled by the authors was the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy in the year 2003. In 2009 was launched another initiative called Eastern Partnership, after the build-up in 2008 of the Union of Mediterranean Sea states. The intention of Eastern Partnership was to deepen the European Neighbourhood Policy in the neighbouring

states from ex-Soviet space. But this Eastern Partnership had to face certain limits in the actual given context such as: “the limits of a low engagement of EU in what it concerns the integration of the states of Eastern Partnership”, “the general geopolitical context and the opposition of the Russian Federation towards this project in particular”, “specific national interests of the states from Eastern Partnership”. (transl.) (Brie et al., 2025; Brie, 2017b).

The intention of the authors was to study the evolution of the Republic of Moldova in its way up to European Union. The authors points out that the story of the Republic of Moldova is the most successful story of European integration from the states member in Eastern Partnership. In the same time, among these states, the Republic of Moldova is the greatest recipient of European funds as a states of European policy of vicinity. (Brie et al., 2025: 48; Costea; Putină, & Brie, 2024).

Another fact signalled by the authors is that, during the pandemic of the virus Covid-19, European Commission offered to the Republic of Moldova a substantial help of 100 millions Euro. (Brie et al., 2025: 50).

The authors of the present volume offered the index of Eastern Partnership in order to quantify the progresses achieved by the Republic of Moldova in fields such as: “economy, security, state of law, inter-connectivity, mobility” (transl.) (p. 50-51) A part of these data were published in a Pilot Project in November 2011. (Brie et al., 2025: 51; Brie, 2017a).

Analysing the index of Eastern Partnership countries during 2011-2023, the authors of the volume show that, in the context of the aggression of Russia towards Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova approached, more and more, the European Union. The index of Eastern Partnership, shows the authors, includes three macro dimensions: “**management**”, “**approximation**” and “**linkage**”. The principle of **management** is based on a mechanism of coordination that has as target the legislative harmonization of the laws of Republic of Moldova with the legislative framework of the EU, the involvement of civil society in the public issues and political life in the Republic of Moldova and also the management of EU-Moldovan affairs.

The second dimension of the index of European Partnership is **approximation**. It refers to problems such as “democracy; state of law; the quality of governance; market economy; liberty; security and justice; energy and transport; environment; education and mobilities” (transl.) (Brie et al., 2025: 54) At this chapter, the index was analysed during an interval of 12 years (the minimum for the Republic of Moldova was in 2012 and 2017, namely 0.65 and the maximum was 0.73 for the same country during 2015-2016) (Goreainov, and Brie, 2018; Brie, 2022; Toderaş, 2022a; Toderaş, 2022b).

The third dimension of the index of Eastern Partnership is **linkage**. (Brie et al., 2025: 55). It refers to issues such as: “political dialogue; commerce and European integration; transport and energy; liberty; security and justice; education and mobilities (people to people) and assistance for international security, political dialogue and communication” (transl.) (Brie et al., 2025: 55). The minimum of this index for the Republic of Moldova was 0.68 and the maximum was 0.71.

The authors of the present volume bring into discussion the issue of **association agreement** between the Republic of Moldova and European Union, relations that had developed in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The Republic of Moldova elaborated, in the actual context, an action plan with the target to implement the requests of the European Commission. In August 2022, it was enacted the document Agenda of Association EU-Republic of Moldova with mentioned the priorities emerged in the context of EU- Republic of Moldova association agreement. (Brie et al., 2025: 57). In the process of negotiations between EU-Republic of Moldova emerged new issues such as: “democratization of the Republic of Moldova; energetic security and digitalisation” (transl.) (Brie et al., 2025: 65).

In the year 2024, it was elaborated a report reflecting the relationship between Republic of Moldova and EU revealing that: “The Republic of Moldova demonstrated a significant resilience in the process of its adherence to EU, mastering efficiently the challenges of the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and the tryings of Russian Federation of internal destabilization of Republic of Moldova by means of hybrid actions” (transl.) (Brie et al., 2025: 65). There were achieved substantial progress in various domains such as “judicial system”, “fight against corruption”, “the combat of organized crime”, “concurrence”, “monetary and economic policy”, and “reforms in public administration”.

Another important event was the fact that, in October 20, 2024, in the Republic of Moldova it took place a referendum concerning the introduction in the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova of the objective of integration of this state in European Union as full member, referendum who reached a number of 50,35% of affirmative votes. It is imperious, consider the authors of the present volume, an **economic transformation** to occur in the Republic of Moldova in order that this country to be accepted in the European Union. (Brie et al., 2025: 67). In consequence, the Republic of Moldova will have to revise its policies concerning the economic development, the industrial development as well and, also, the innovation and research framework.

Another fact remarked by the authors is that, although the GDP of the Republic of Moldova increased in the last years, it is still small. The economic

growth in the last years in the Republic of Moldova was of 4,6%, point out the authors.

Chapter III is entitled *The relationship between the Republic of Moldova and Romania, as the main element of Romania's foreign policy*. The relations between the two countries since 1991 has as target the European integration of the Republic of Moldova and the intensification of cooperation between the two states (Brie et al., 2025: 73; Brie, 2021a; Brie, 2023). The purpose of this collaboration was the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova towards European Union' culture and values (Brie, 2018). In 2010, it was signed the Declaration for a strategic partnership between the two countries focusing on the European integration of the Moldovan state. Romanian state offered support for the implementation of the Association Agreement of the Republic of Moldova with EU and, also, militated for the liberalization of visas for the Republic of Moldova' citizens. Romania offered to the Republic of Moldova an "unconditioned support" with the view of its European integration (Brie et al., 2025: 74).

In 2020, it was signed an agreement for technological and financial assistance of the Republic of Moldova by Romania; Romania granting to Moldovan state 100 millions Euro, supporting thus specific projects. In 2022, it was granted to the Republic of Moldova by Romanian state another 100 millions of Euro for 7 years.

It was created a platform of support of the Republic of Moldova in the view of its adherence to EU in 2022 with the support of Romania, France, Germany, USA. (Brie et al., 2025: 75) The purpose was to offer to the Republic of Moldova political financial and logistic assistance with the view of its future adherence to EU and also support to implement necessary internal reforms. Also, Romania was the main bilateral creditor of the Republic of Moldova. (Brie et al., 2025: 76). It offered to the Republic of Moldova a loan of 150 millions Euro in 2014.

Also, Romania was an important economic partner of the Republic of Moldova, especially in the field of commerce and investments. Many Romanian state or private companies made investments in the Republic of Moldova in the last years. With the help of Romanian capital, the banking system of the Republic of Moldova bypassed the robberies of 2012-2014. Romanian Society for Natural Gas ("TRANSGAZ" S.A.) made investments in Romania and Republic of Moldova in the value of 430 millions Euro. In the energetic domain, there were also common projects Romania- Republic of Moldova (Brie et al., 2025: 77). Thus Republic of Moldova separated by energetic initiatives of Russian Federation (Brie et al., 2025: 78), becoming more and more autonomous in the domain of energetic potential.

Also, Romania and the Republic of Moldova cooperated in the military field (Brie et al., 2025: 78), being signed an agreement for military cooperation in 2012. Moldovan state will integrate solidly in European defence and security policy (Brie et al., 2025: 79).

Another domain for joint cooperation between Romania and Republic of Moldova is the one of education. (Brie et al., 2025: 79), including by offering from the Romanian state of a few thousands of scholarships to Moldovan students. The Educational system of the Republic of Moldova will integrate, slowly in the European system of Education.

Most projects between Romania and the Republic of Moldova focused on issues such as “modernization of schools and kindergartens”, “reduction of energetic vulnerabilities”, “support of civil society” (transl.) in the Republic of Moldova. (Brie et al., 2025: 80; Costea and Brie, 2025; Brie, & Putină, 2023; Brie, and Solcan, 2025; Putină, & Brie, 2023).

Chapter four is entitled *Romania's European path: good practice lessons and their transfer towards the Republic of Moldova*. Romania can transmit to the Republic of Moldova, lessons that can be structured on three layers: 1. The insurance of the internal stability and strategical planning, 2. The modality of fundamentation of the strategy of negotiations for adherence and 3. the definitivation and continuous strengthening of institutional system and internal governance (transl.) (Brie et al., 2025: 81).

Concerning the first desiderata, the **Declaration of Snagov** from June 21, 1995, paved the way for the creation of a political consensus regarding the adherence to EU and NATO. Republic of Moldova started its way to European and Euroatlantic integration following the pattern of Romania and consensus for its integration in NATO and EU was visible since 2005.

The authors notice that after it was reached the objective of Romania's adherence to EU, the path of European integration was slowed down. (Brie et al., 2025: 82) Objectives such as the adherence to Schengen space and European monetary and economic integration were put on a far-away plan. Concerning the public communication, the authors notice that on the way of the completion of negotiations for adherence of Romania to EU, it came up a campaign of false myths about EU (Brie et al., 2025: 84). It was elaborated a strategy of public communication in order to put an end to this phenomenon.

The authors focus later on the strategy of negotiation. In the first year of negotiation, shows the authors, Romania opened 9 chapters. By the end of 2002, all the chapters of negotiation were opened. (Brie et al., 2025: 89). The current negotiation framework of EU- Republic of Moldova involved 35 chapters that will be negotiated between 2025-2028. (Brie et al., 2025: 90).

In the opinion of the authors (Brie et al., 2025: 97), Republic of Moldova has a lot to learn from Romania's integration process, concerning, especially, the coordination of European Affairs. It is necessary to establish an "appropriate governance framework" which to set up the competences and institutions involved in the process of European integration, including in the post-accession time. Republic of Moldova must maintain "stability" of the coordination of integration system and to implement the necessary legislative framework for the achievement of European integration process (Brie et al., 2025: 98).

An important lesson which Republic of Moldova must learn from Romania's lesson of integration is that "The management and control system is difficult to build and is a parallel process to the negotiation process" (Brie et al., 2025: 100).

Romania in its pre-accession process created several positions in public administration. A body of European integration was subordinated to the Ministry of European integration (Brie et al., 2025: 100). Republic of Moldova, suggests the authors, can learn from the lessons of Romania that it is important to train "specialized personal" and provide them mobilities, forming thus a team of experts in European Union issues.

The similarities of the process of European integration in Romania and Republic of Moldova make the authors believe that the Romanian "experiment" of European integration can provide lessons for Moldova's case.

Chapter V is entitled *Future scenarios on the Republic of Moldova's EU integration process and Romania's view in regarding them*.

Building the potential scenarios of development of Republic of Moldova, the authors take into consideration the geopolitics of states such as Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, the EU, the Russian Federation, Romania and NATO/USA, the building of these scenarios taking into consideration the certainties of present times and, also, uncertainties, of the future times. (Brie et al., 2025: 103). In what it concerns the EU-Moldovan relation, the most probable scenario is to change voting method from "unanimity" to "qualified majority" (Brie et al., 2025: 104).

In what it concerns EU-Russian Federation relationship, it is probable that sanctions are maintained and a more normal relation between these two will follow and the authors wonder how these changes will influence the situation of Moldovan state. (Brie et al., 2025: 105).

Another question raised by the authors is how Russian attack on Ukraine will influence the accession to EU of the Moldovan state. (Brie et al., 2025: 105).

And last but not least, is how the internal evolution of the Republic of Moldova like “societal fragmentation” and “economic development” will influence the view of decision-makers in this country and the path of European integration (Brie et al., 2025: 105).

The authors allocate a space regarding “*Best case scenario: the Republic of Moldova in the EU by 2030*”. This is the target established by the authorities from Chişinău (Brie et al., 2025: 105) according to this scenario the events from Ukraine (Russian invasion) will not slow down Moldovan state’s accession. NATO would be a factor of stability in the policy of Republic of Moldova while Romania is the most important Eastern supporter of the Republic of Moldova (Brie et al., 2025: 106) during its integrative process, including by adaptation of this country of the *acquis communautaire*. Republic of Moldova can have a separative path of integration from Ukraine or another scenario is to be coupled together (Moldova and Ukraine) in the process of integration finishing this process in the same time (Brie et al., 2025: 108). The third scenario identified by the authors of the present volume is “Maintaining the Status Quo” (the two countries will start together the accession negotiation and Republic of Moldova will be delayed in this process because of the events from Ukraine) (Brie et al., 2025: 111). In this scenario, NATO is not a valid option for the two countries.

The forth-scenario identified by the authors of collective volume is “The Republic of Moldova – buffer zone between East and West”. (Brie et al., 2025: 113). According to this scenario the conflict EU-Russian Federation will continue and the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a “buffer zone” and this scenario has no prospects for medium and short-term integration in institutions such as EU and NATO.

The fifth scenario identified by the authors is “Worst case scenario: the Republic of Moldova-Indefinitely Non-EU”. In this case EU will “freeze” negotiation processes with the two countries: the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine and will cease material aid towards Ukraine. The states will remain in “Eastern Partnership” without perspectives for European integration (Brie et al., 2025: 116), the two countries will be members in Eurasian economic union, not in EU, while NATO will cease to be an “option” for Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Chapter 6 is entitled *Dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova*. The authors allocate a space to “feasibility of the Republic of Moldova’s Accession to the EU by 2030” (Brie et al., 2025: 119). This process will be achieved if, the Republic of Moldova, continues its way of reforms in the context of internal political stability. EU members states and, especially, Romania will support and assist the Republic of Moldova to the full membership of the European Union. The author points out, that, in

the context of Romanian-Ukrainian war, the Republic of Moldova seems to be a “strategic partner for stability and security in the region”. Stakeholders were interviewed about potential adherence of the Republic of Moldova to EU, by 2030, saying a yes to this question and considering that the socio-economic development of the country will make a difference then. Most decision-makers think that by 2030, the Republic of Moldova will join EU. Some respondents underlined that for future adherence of the Republic of Moldova is important “the geopolitical context” in which this country is placed. A quarter of the respondents consider that the Republic of Moldova will join EU after 2030. Only one voter consider that Scenario 3 is valid, namely that the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will begin together the accession negotiations, and “will continue indefinitely but without clear timeframes or deadlines” (Brie et al., 2025: 121).

Chapter 7 is entitled *Recommendation for supporting the Republic of Moldova in the context of European integration*. These are three kinds of recommendations: “strategic”, “tactical” and “operational” (Brie et al., 2025: 135).

At the strategic level, we have the next recommendation: “Ensuring support that is unitary, structured and complete, coherent, convincing, and performance-oriented” (Brie et al, 2025: 135). EU provides support to Republic of Moldova in the view of integration in order to reach “institutional convergence” between the two entities. It is necessary a transfer from EU to Republic of Moldova of “successful and high-quality practices”. From Russians pattern of integration and failures, Republic of Moldova will have to learn.

At tactical level we have the next recommendation: “Establish an integrative approach at the level of the national strategic framework”. Republic of Moldova will be supported “in the conduct of negotiations on chapters and preparations for EU accession”. Also “the institutional strategic plans” will include “objectives and measures” in order to help Republic of Moldova to conduct negotiations with the view of accession”.

Another recommendation at “tactical” level is: “Establish a national focal point for providing support for the European integration of the Republic of Moldova” that should act as an interface between public administration requirements of the Republic of Moldova and the expertise in this field coming from Romania. The last recommendation at tactical level is: “Accelerate the maturation processes of strategic connectivity projects with the Republic of Moldova”. At this chapter it is necessary to identify strategic projects to be started and developed in the post 2027 financial period.

At the dimension Operational level, we have the next recommendation “Revitalizing the activity of the Romania- Republic of Moldova Joint

Intergovernmental Commission for European Integration”. The EU Commission must supervise the evaluation of cooperation and the new initiatives in the domain of European integration of the Moldovan state.

The second recommendation at operational level is “Providing financial incentives to civil servants participating in expertise transfer missions in the Republic of Moldova”. The Romanian expertise in Republic of Moldova in the domain of public administration must provide civil servants having their expenses and transport covered. The next recommendation at this chapter is: “Establish an institutional mechanism for the medium-term (1-3 months) and long-term (more than 3 months) secondment of civil servants from Romania’s central public administration to the Republic of Moldova”. The authors remarks the similarity between this mechanism and EU-funded twinning missions based on a “financial incentive component” like the one described in the anterior recommendation. Other two recommendations at operational level are: “Supporting the economic and industrial transformation of the Republic of Moldova by involving experts from the Republic of Moldova in the specific processes of implementing the National Strategy for Research, Innovation and Smart Specialization 2022-2027 at the national level, as well as the regional the North East and South East development regions”. And the last recommendation at operational level is “Intensify the transfer of expertise from Romania t the Republic of Moldova in the field of education at all levels, with a view of enabling Moldova’s participation in the European Education Area starting from the pre-accession stage” (Brie et al., 2025: 139).

Chapter 8 is entitled *Conclusions*. The integration in the European Union of the Republic of Moldova was influenced by “geopolitical context” and by “internal political changes” (Brie et al., 2025: 142). Concerning the geopolitical context, NATO and EU became important actors in the region, integrating in their ranks states from former USSR, while Russian Federation by the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in the year 2000 showed a policy of “hostility” in the region of Ukraine and Republic of Moldova. The population of the Republic of Moldova was the subject of “hybrid warfare” with the Russians, think the authors (Brie et al., 2025: 142). Some governments that took the power in the Republic of Moldova in the last decades were favourable to European Integration while others not. The last woman president, Maia Sandu regarded with benevolence the desiderata of European integration of the Republic of Moldova. On the ground of Russian annexation of Crimea, citizens of Republic of Moldova (after 2014) received the right to have free and visa-free access for EU-space.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine brought insecurity in the region of the Republic of Moldova (Brie at al., 2025: 143). The security of the entire European continent will be strengthened by the access of Republic of

Moldova as a full member of the European Union. The “hybrid” war started by Russian Federation with the Moldovan state “contributes to a process of eroding democracy and threatens the consolidation of the rule of law and political balance”. Other factor of instability in the region is the conflict from Transnistria last but not least, the authors of the present volume pointed out the determinant role of Romania “in the democratization and Europeanization of Republic of Moldova” (Brie et al., 2025: 144) Romania’s future and present support for the Republic of Moldova to start and develop the negotiation process and the help in implementation of reforms in view of integration is a constant phenomenon. Facilitating exchanges of specialists and students from Republic of Moldova in Romania will enrich the Moldovan process of integration with expertise from Romanian experiment of integration in EU (Brie et al., 2025: 146).

The present book presents various points of view and scenarios concerning the integration of the Republic of Moldova in the European Union. The authors underline Romania’s support in this process. For the interesting details considering the condition of the Republic of Moldova and its neighbours, for its interdisciplinary character, the book is an outstanding publication of the approached domain.

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